

# HARSH MISTRESS

SCIENCE · FICTION · ADVENTURES

\$5



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SPRING/SUMMER, 1993

by B//ou



# Editorial

I was on my way to meet with Kevin and Tim to discuss the possibility of starting a Science Fiction magazine when, over the car's radio, I heard that Isaac Asimov had died.

My initial reaction to the news was one of loss and disbelief. My first exposure to Science Fiction had been *Asimov's Mysteries*. Once past the feelings of loss, I began to reflect on all that he had accomplished.

The mind boggles. Realistically, I don't think any other writer has done as much for Science Fiction as Asimov did. Thinking about this left me somewhat daunted. Who was I to think I could carve out a place beside men like him, Heinlein, Clark, or even Campbell?

I only allowed myself to entertain this thought for a moment. After all, Science Fiction is about daring to dream, taking chances. Without courage there is no Science Fiction.

Science Fiction has a glorious past. The Golden Age is worth remembering. Nevertheless, we should respect the lessons of the New Wave. Science Fiction can *never* be complacent. It must *always* strive to push the envelope a little bit further. And we must remember, where Science Fiction dares to go today, mankind follows tomorrow.

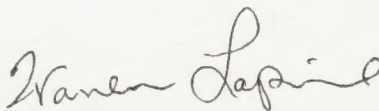
Of late, Science Fiction seems to have taken on an omi-

nously dark tone. Nowhere is that more evident than with Cyberpunk. I don't have the space or time to debate Cyberpunk's relative merits; nor would I if I did. I would say simply that the darker aspects of Science Fiction quite often fails to take into account the invincibility of the human spirit. As long as there are people who are willing to stand up and be counted, our future will remain bright. Mankind's accomplishments are limited only by our imagination. It falls to us, Science Fiction readers and writers, to be mankind's imagination.

The thirst for adventure and knowledge has always been the driving force behind mankind. It has been the source of great triumphs and great failures. It is what sets us apart from the rest of the creatures on Earth. This thirst is mankind's harsh mistress. However, it is this thirst which gives us the potential for greatness.

Here at Harsh Mistress SFA, we want to explore the human spirit, test its mettle. In doing this, we hope to go on many grand adventures.

To you, the reader, I say, "Welcome. The ride is just beginning."



Warren Lapine

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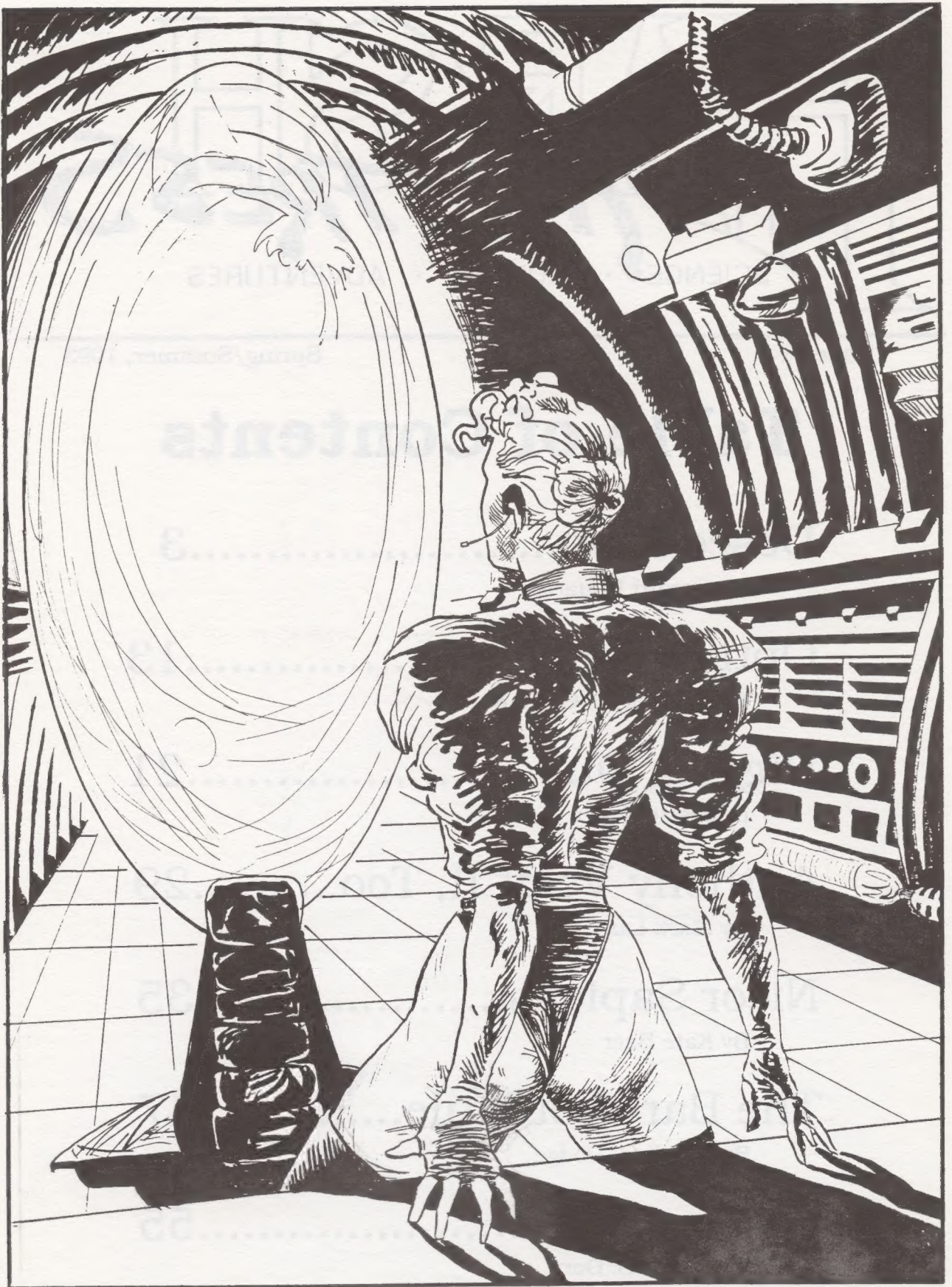
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# Descension

by

Gerard Daniel Houarner

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Electronics wailed as the boat shuddered, rocked, then plunged into the murky depths of Garkain's gravity well.

Sopureh watched helplessly while the A.I. dopple flashed holographic fields of information around her. It seemed as if the ghostly shell of her brother Jason's engineered personality was begging her to join his struggle to pilot the boat. She glanced at the pilot jacks, then closed her eyes and surrendered herself to the boat's violent tremors. Without the internal wires and training of a Service pilot, she could not help.

Over the rattling of metal and the screeching alarms, voices cried out to her on the open comm channel. The voices suddenly cut off, replaced by a clear, strong signal.

"Station Gaea *Boat Nine*, this is the Garkain Occupation Command," stated the clipped female voice of the Command's A.I. personality responsible for space traffic. Only a faint rustle of static softened the detached edge to its words. "Your flight has not been authorized. No clearance has been issued for a landing on Garkain. You are in violation of security procedures. If you do not release the boat's navigational computer to Command control, you will be intercepted."

Jason's dopple flashed the relative positions of the nearest defense satellites and Earth Configuration warships, along with beam and missile intercept plots and probabilities. Sopureh understood the warning. If her brother had been on board, he would have employed his calm A.I. logic and advised her to surrender. Her sister Yirudex particularly would have rebuked him with derisive laughter and challenged her siblings to show courage and press on. Of course, Sopureh thought, if Yirudex and Jason had not disappeared on the planet below, she would never have stolen a boat and tried to break through the Occupational Command's security lines to find them. She had not planned her run particularly well, but creating and planning operations were their responsibilities. She was only the mediator, helping them to cooperate with

each other and the world around them. She was desperate. For once, she felt she had the power to heal the old, searing pain of loss; the bottomless gulf of separation between herself and the only living beings she knew loved her as deeply as she loved them.

"I'm not going back!" Sopureh shouted, breaking the silence she had imposed on herself since breaking into the boat and escaping from Station Gaea. "I know they're down there. Alive. I can feel my sister and if she's alive, Jason must be with her."

A few moments of silence passed before a reply came. "You have been identified as Sopureh Ganeus. Please confirm."

The boat lurched forward. A holographic symbol glowed red before her, indicating a danger of the boat bouncing off of Garkain's atmosphere. The A.I. dopple continued to struggle, adding its power to the boat's own computers in developing an atmosphere entry program. Sopureh reached for the dopple rod imbedded in the boat's control console, but she was too far away to caress the smooth metal.

Another voice broke over the channel. Its familiar gruffness brought tears to her eyes.

"Sopureh!" her father shouted. "Are you mad?" There's no point to this. Get back before they shoot you down." The air in the boat cabin crackled with his authority: Pira Ganeus, Earth Configuration councillor, the geneticist who dared experiment on himself and his family.

His voice settled over Sopureh like every suffocating regime, every experiment and training program she and her siblings had endured throughout their upbringing. She shuddered, the faint spark of joy she had experienced in breaking out of the Station was snuffed out by her father's cold voice.

"Garkain Occupational Command will intercept. Repeat, intercept," the masculine voice of the Command's coordinating A.I. intruded. "Lethal force on human violator is the option of last resort."

"You know what will happen," her father said over



the growing static. "They won't let you land under any circumstances."

"Leave me alone!" she cried out. Echoes of his voice rose out of the deepest pits of her memory. She could remember his hands scooping her out of the nursery for the first time, tearing her out of the warm nutrient mist and sundering the intimate world of shared human and A.I. infancy. His voice was the voice of pain. His hand, walls that had come between her and her siblings. Though she could never remember such a thing, in her nightmares he peered into the tube in which she and her sister had been conceived, his brow creased in concentration as he studied the viability of his latest experiment. He had taught her loneliness when he isolated her in the prison of his training schedules, systems and programs. He had taught her the Earth Configurations's equations for success, molding his children's relationships through separations and controlled reunions until his creations functioned along the parameters he had designed into them, until they became the tool he desired them to be.

She almost screamed out her hatred of him, but the boat's rough descent knocked the breath from her.

Gasping, she fought to regain her composure. She was supposed to be the reasonable child, empathic yet balanced. An outburst would sound too much like Yirudex and would be intercepted as hysteria. Sopureh clenched her jaws and shut her eyes. At last, she was able to speak as calmly as the shaking of the boat would allow.

"I have a plan," she said.

The channel was dead for a moment. The boat's sensor displays showed a nearby E-Con ship and two satellites locking their weapons systems on to her.

"What's your plan, negotiate with aliens?" Her father's words were edged with sarcasm. She understood he was testing her. Did she believe the rumors that not all of the unseen aliens disrupting E-Con shipping and bases had fled Garkain after the scout ship *Canberra* had followed their tachyon trail to the planet? Did she think her siblings had concocted a plan to communicate with them, discover their intentions? Did she believe herself to be a part of such a plan? How deeply into madness, she knew he wondered, had the apparent loss of her siblings driven her?

She could not let him know that her only plan was to stall for time until she was safely out of the Command's interception range. A simple madness meant a quick end to the chase.

"Of course not," she replied. "They're gone."

"But if they weren't, Sopureh." His voice softened, yet remained insistent. She understood then that his hope was not focussed on their survival, but on the outside chance of an alien contact. "If the three of you had somehow managed to find them--"

"How?"

"You tell me."

For a moment, Sopureh wondered if the suddenly calm voice speaking to her belonged to an A.I. mimicking her father. She felt her father's relentless clinical curiosity sifting through her answers, probing for weakness, hidden truths. Watching the sensor displaying E-Con weapon systems tracking the boat, she spoke. "Even if there were aliens down there, and we managed to find them, how would we survive them?"

"Maybe Jason and Yirudex didn't. Perhaps you won't either. Come back to the Station, Sopureh. Talk to us. Talk to me."

With her eyes still closed, she went on with the game.

"No, I won't leave them down there. I can feel her." Which was truth, of a kind. Sopureh could still feel Yirudex within her, still remember with a rush of excitement her sudden leaps of insight, her dancer's grace, and the smooth, taut musculature of her body. She just could not feel her alive.

"Feel?" There was a trace of genuine curiosity in the question. No A.I. program could so successfully mimic her father's reaction and tone. "Is there pain or discomfort? Are your heart rhythms synchronized? Do you hear and see what she is experiencing?"

"No, this isn't one of your experiments, Father." Careful, she thought, reining in her anger. The boat was settling into a landing window at last, though another E-Con ship had locked its weapons on to her. With Garkain filling the visual screens, she bolstered her description with a truth he had seen for himself: "I felt her leave the Base Camp from the Gaea Station, Father."

"Low-grade psychic linkage," he said, with a dismissive snort. She winced reflexively at his rejection. "Within your link's parameters."

"I can feel her heart beating now; I sense her breathing," she lied.

"Body specific sensations over such a distance? Your sibling bond never tested that strongly before," her father said. "What is she thinking?"

"I can't tell, I can't read her mind. But I don't feel any fear from her."

Silence for a breath.

"Why didn't you come to me, or the Station Coordinator, and report this?" He asked.

"Because you'd want to run your tests before letting me go, and by then I would have lost her."

Silence again; her father's analytic pause. She waited for his judgement, fearful and angry at the same time.

"The craft she and Jason went out in was light atmospheric. It couldn't survive the storm she flew into. And even if she managed to land, her planetfall suit's power cell is exhausted by now. She had no life support. How can she be alive?"



The boat passed beyond the range of one of the defensive satellites. She entered another satellite's sector, but it did not lock its weapons on to her boat. One of the E-Con ships dropped out of the chase, leaving a one-man craft and several drones following her flight path.

"Maybe she was carrying a survival pod, or extra batteries, or tapped into her ship's or Jason's power system," Sopureh replied, exasperated by his logic. "Maybe she reached an abandoned staging hut set up by one of the Base Camps. Who knows if they didn't really find aliens left behind in the evacuation and they all agreed to hide from E-Con in some sealed off cave." She wanted to believe in dreams of survival. She wanted to ask her father why he could not hope for his children.

Her father cleared his throat, expressing his displeasure with her fantasies. The pursuing E-Con ship closed the distance between them. "If she's alive, why hasn't she contacted us? Why can't we detect Jason's power source or homing beacon?"

"Maybe they don't want to be found by you."

He answered quickly, his tone becoming brusque once more. "Why couldn't you sense her after she disappeared in the storm? Why now?"

Hands clenched into fists, she fought back the answer she wanted to give: why have you never been able to sense us outside of your labs? Instead, she said, "Perhaps she didn't want me to."

The air buzzed with clouds of micro-maintenance robots repairing circuitry damaged from the rough atmosphere entry. Jason's doppel offered her a choice of stimulant or calming chemicals through a spray administrator set into the back of her chair. She refused. Neither would help her cope with her father or find her siblings.

"What if Yirudex and Jason don't want to come back to either of us?" Master Ganeus asked at last.

Sopureh's heart fluttered, her vision clouded. The possibility was beyond pain.

Navigational systems called her attention to the landing coordinates scrolling before her. Alien artifact sites flashed red, E-Con bases glowed green. She focused on the *Canberra* crash coordinates flashing yellow as well as red, indicating a decision had to be made if she wanted that landing option. She shivered. The bloody final images from the many virtual dramas she had experienced about the *Canberra* pilot Lebi'D's epic quest filled her mind. Virtual artists had spent the last ten years speculating on the reasons why the Aboriginal pilot named the suspected alien home world after a Dreamtime demon. Fed by E-Con propaganda, the virtual dramas had used the demon name to fill E-Con citizens with horrific visions of alien creatures appearing out of nowhere and devouring Lebi'D, ship crews, base personnel. The drama characters spouted theories for the aliens' actions ranging from religious rituals to harassment as a prelude to

full-scale war.

Sopureh thought of the scientists and strategists sifting through the scarce data from the empty, undamaged ships and bases which were all that remained after alien raids; A.I.'s running elaborate extrapolation programs; Company boards and chiefs meeting to determine the best way to present a mystery to E-Con citizens. She thought of her father dedicated to manipulating and improving humanity's stock, secure in his laboratory nest on Station Gaea while he and his team attempted to re-create alien life from their study of the planet's matter and history.

The theories and dramas were illusions; scientists and A.I.'s: fools. Yirudex had always said as much, and even Jason reluctantly agreed. Suddenly, Sopureh felt certain her siblings had discovered a way through all the illusions to confront the alien mystery. They had deliberately flown into the heart of a Garkain storm. Their act was a message: There was no time to bring her down before they had to leave. Their disappearance was a beacon showing her the way to the truth they had discovered.

On impulse, Sopureh selected the *Canberra* site. The boat shook slightly, banked and steepened its angle of descent. Sopureh wondered if Yirudex had, by at last reaching out to her, guided her thoughts and emotions towards the impulse to land at the *Canberra*'s crash site, the eye of the Garkain mystery. She had a moment of elation before doubt soured her joy. Her hope might just as easily be the insanity her father assumed had taken her over.

"Why are you landing? You know the Base Camp's already searched for them," her father said suddenly. His angry voice stung her, "Why don't you listen? No one on the ground detected any trace of them. They're dead. Gone. Don't waste yourself with this foolishness. I can't override Occupation Command security protocols. Don't you understand?"

"Afraid of losing all of your precious experiment?" Sopureh shot back.

The channel cleared. The voice of the O.C. returned.

"Final warning to boat pilot Sopureh Ganeus. Turn guidance control over to Command control."

The drones picked up speed and flanked her descending craft. The A.I. doppel filtered the boat's sensor information, and displayed the tactical options of her pursuers. First, they would try to clamp the drones on her, and force her back to Station Gaea. Sopureh concluded she was still considered valuable property, even if her mediating and integrative talents were wasted without Yirudex's inspirations and Jason's knowledge and logic systems. Failure to lock on to the boat would cause the drones to self-destruct. The E-Con ship behind her would launch missiles if the boat survived the drones'



detonations. Satellite missiles and beams were locked onto her as a final precaution.

"Excellent analysis," Sopureh told the Jason dopple. "Any suggestions on getting through it all?"

Evasion options with dwindling success probabilities twirled before her like stars veiled by atmosphere.

Sopureh sagged in the command chair, despair rather than gravity pinning her in place. Emptiness, vast as space, raw as the howl of radiation, was all she carried with her.

Something moved on the floor beside the boat command console. Sopureh turned to stare. The A.I. dopple signalled a default evasion selection. The boat shook, the whine of a power surge through the engines filled the air.

A black oval-shaped object rose through the deck.

Sopureh gasped. "Father--" she cried out. The boat bucked, swerved, and she lost the breath to continue.

A part of her watched the drones close in. Radiation counters burst into crimson blotches. She braced herself for death. She wondered if E-Con would destroy her before the thing in the boat did. A drone exploded, but evasion maneuvers saved the boat. The object continued to rise, passing through the metal deck, power conduits and wiring without disrupting the boat's functioning.

Sopureh wondered if she was hallucinating.

Before another evasion program could come online, the boat swerved once more, deviating from the flight path outlined on the holographic screens. A drone exploded. Another peeled away as if lured by some other target. The last turned on the E-Con ship, which destroyed the drone with a volley of missiles.

The oval-shaped thing came to rest filling the cabin from the floor to ceiling. The smooth, glistening black surface followed a gentle swelling that peaked at its center. The boat sensors indicated no hull breach or unusual readings in the environment. Sopureh checked the flight recording. The playback was indecipherable, a cloud of static--like the recordings from every E-Con ship and base ever raided by the aliens.

The object slowly rotated, revealing a flat opposing side on which the surface folded into itself along a line of velvet darkness.

Sopureh flattened herself into the chair. Her haze darted to the disengaged eject activator. Then the navigational system turned itself off. The boat was flying towards Garkain without a pilot.

Other systems shut down; communications, space-oriented sensors, main engines. Jason's dopple flashed as an anomaly warning on several screens before they blanked out; a harsh bark escaped the speakers before they hissed and fell silent. Sopureh glanced at the

weapons locker at the back of the cabin.

The boat jumped like a stone skipping over water, then plummeted suddenly. Nausea welled up in Sopureh, and her vision darkened. Then the boat's flight settled once more. Missiles curled towards Garkain's surface. Sopureh shook her head to clear her senses. She studied the remaining sensor screens for a sign of the pursuing E-Con ship and scanned for operational systems capable of signalling the Occupation Command. Then she saw the storm gathering on Garkain.

Boat sensors outlined the savage atmospheric turbulence building with sudden, terrible force over the *Canberra* site. As she watched, magnetic and electrical fields reached up past the dense atmospheric envelope and swirled around her, leaving a tiny window for the boat to descend through the storm. More violent and far-reaching than Garkain's usual planetary disturbances the storm had no doubt surprised her pursuers, disrupted their systems. She hoped the E-Con ship chasing her was not trying to pick its way through the twisting spiraling funnel of energy that had her in its grasp.

The alien thing suddenly moved towards her. The air in the cabin chilled. Fear choked Sopureh's breath, numbed her body and mind. Her limbs felt bloodless, cold. Though she tried, she could not raise her arms, and clenching her hands into fists drained her strength. The reality of her situation closed over Sopureh like the lid of an ancient tomb. The aliens had either used Garkain's bizarre planetary forces or hidden behind an anticipated eruption the O.C. had never observed to take over her ship. She was following Yirudex and Jason into Garkain's mysterious heart. Worse than her fear of dying, the reality of her siblings' deaths was settling over her like a blinding darkness.

"Sister," a gentle voice called. Sopureh started. She tried to focus her eyes, but found only darkness accented by floating holographic displays. The alien was out of sight, but Garkain poured into her through the planetary sensors and screens. Clouds rose in a whirling vortex. Winds and turbulence increased until Sopureh thought the boat was going to shake apart. Magnetic fields, clothed in faint shimmers of color, danced on the external visual screens. Lightning arced across the sky.

"Who's there?" Sopureh shouted, pounding the dead communication board on her chair arm.

"Please relax, Sopureh," a voice deeper than the first replied. "You're safe with us."

"Jason?" Sopureh asked faintly. "Yirudex?" She squirmed, trying to pry forms from the blackness around her. There was still no sign of intruders on the internal sensors.

Missiles launched from above strayed from their tracks and were swallowed by clouds. Orbitals fired their beam weapons, but the beams curved or dissipated as they entered Garkain's wildly fluctuating magnetic fields



and changing atmospheric densities. In the cabin there was only the sound of groaning metal.

The boat slid further into the storm funnel reaching up from the *Canberra* site. A vortex of wind parted the clouds before her, and fields of energy vaulted up around the boat. Sopureh thought of the nave in ancient cathedrals on Earth leading to the apse, the church's spiritual heart. She wondered about the voices calling her.

"Please, if you're there, answer me. Yirudex? Jason?" Her warm breath billowed in clouds by the faint screen and holo light.

Sopureh swallowed a lump in her throat. Suddenly, stray memories, vivid and powerful, filled her mind: the sound of Yirudex's laughter in the crawl tunnel of a training station as Sopureh and Jason tried to talk her out of her playful escape from Father's training session; the cold feel of Jason's first and last remote body, even though the armature had been draped in the highest grade flesh simulation; the smell of Yirudex's sweat.

Her scalp tingled, and the memories became single images from her past flashing by too quickly to grasp. She felt as if something were riffling through her mind. She tried to fight, hold back her memories, but instead almost blacked out. When her vision cleared she checked the biofeedback monitors but found no unusual readings.

The boat landed in a spray of dust that floated gently back to the surface like a sparkling curtain. Security scanners detected no patterned movements or power sources in the area. The edge of the *Canberra's* crash scar ran along the boat's forward landing skid. The boat sensors revealed only traces of metallic wreckage, common to deep-space ships, fused with Garkain rock.

Clouds and mist roiled along the distant walls of the wind vortex, while in the dome-shaped space the vortex had created, flashes of lightning illuminated an undulating terrain of stone hills and rock spires.

Sopureh waited for the alien in the boat to move. She craned her neck, peered into the darkness, saw nothing. A fiery trail broke through the cloud cover. Sopureh watched the E-Con ship that had been chasing her fall from the sky, its crash causing a small tremor. Then the visual screens blacked out and the holo fields shivered and collapsed into invisibility. The blackness pressed in on her like starless night, infinite and crushing.

Then a glow drew her attention to the back of the cabin. A halo of soft light grew around the oval-shaped entity.

"Please, put on the planetfall suit," said Jason's voice. "Join us outside."

Sopureh, unable to move, stared at the alien. She waited for the creature to rush her, consume her in the great fold in its body, tear her apart and consume her like the monsters in the virtual dramas. The nimbus of

light peaked in intensity and remained steady, illuminating the path to the suit locker for her.

"Oh, come on, Sopureh. We're waiting."

Yirudex's sharpness made Sopureh jump from her seat. Before she was aware of her actions, she was easing into the soft foam interior of an open planetfall suit. She did not let the alien out of her sight.

Once she was sealed in, Sopureh headed for the airlock hatch, hesitated, then eased back towards the controls. Expecting the alien's glow to extinguish, she turned on the suit's external lights as she drew out Jason's dopple. The alien did nothing. Returning to the door, she paused next to the weapons locker. The beam weapon's charge indicators were dead. She doubted the projectile weapons would do much damage to a creature capable of passing through a boat hull.

Sopureh went out onto the Garkain surface with the small comfort of her brother's dopple augmenting the suit's computers. It greeted her with visuals outlining the atmospheric turbulence and magnetic fields warping and flexing outside the dome. Silence, except for the hum of the suit's power, wrapped itself tightly around her.

She went down into the shallow gully of the *Canberra* crash scar and followed its straight path until it ended in a patch of scorched ground. She looked back at the boat. The planetfall's instruments and cameras revealed an empty stretch of rock lit from the suit.

Ahead, like the alien aboard the boat, Yirudex appeared suddenly, without warning, beside a floating transport sled containing Jason's console. Sopureh did not move, but checked the suit's instrumentation for malfunctions. Jason's dopple confirmed the appearance and identity of the two figures. It confirmed, as well, that Yirudex was standing naked in Garkain's fatal atmosphere.

"Hi, Soapy," Yirudex said, her voice as clear and musical as chimes.

"Welcome, Sopureh." The deep bass of Jason's voice reverberated in the suit and in the pit of her stomach.

Sopureh opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She blinked, flushed her eyes with air and wash, scanned the biofeedback monitors. If she was dreaming or dead, the illusion of living reality was strong.

"What, nothing to say to your lost sister?" Yirudex teased, her laughter tinkling, fading into silence as she closed the distance between them.

Sopureh noticed her sister's feet left no prints on the ground.

"You're not here," Sopureh said, not bothering to broadcast across any channels. The emptiness that had driven her to Garkain still twisted within her. Sopureh felt nothing from the figure.

"If we aren't," Jason said, gliding up on the sled to hover beside her, "then you must be crazy."

"Holographic projections...a rigged suit..."



everything staged...one of Father's experiments," Sopureh reasoned, as the hurt of betrayal cut deep into her heart. "Please, tell me you're A.I. simulations. You're not really Yirudex and Jason in a lab somewhere, playing with me. That would be too much." Sopureh said, tears burning in her eyes, "the two of you, with him, playing with me."

Yirudex reached out to the planetfall suit. Cold fingertips touched Sopureh's arm. Startled, she pulled her arm away before she realized nothing should have penetrated the suit's armor to chill her skin. In the part of her heart where she had always felt Yirudex, something cold and vast turned. Sopureh shivered.

"Father isn't involved, Soapy. You think he could arrange all of this?" Yirudex indicated the dome of clouds overhead with a sweep of her arm. "Do you really think we would go over to him against you?" Yirudex's face filled the suit visor. Her wide, rounded eyes never blinked, her lips never parted.

The sharp pain of betrayal faded to a dull, throbbing ache. "Not good enough for an A.I. simulation," she murmured, staring at the stone mask of her sister's face. She turned to Jason, studied the dead displays, the neatly severed cables, the empty power cell and A.I. doppel slots. "What are you?" She asked.

"Your brother and sister, as you can see, Sopureh," Jason answered.

"Come on, don't tell me you're real! Walking around on Garkain without a planetfall suit, leaving no tracks." Anger mixed with confusion and fear in Sopureh's mind as she tried to make sense of the apparitions before her. Too primitive for holographic projections, too incredible to be real, Sopureh reasoned. The images and voices had to be manifestations of her guilt. She should have died with them, and now her mind had created their images to haunt her.

Sopureh turned her back on them and started walking towards the boat. She carried with her the cold, heavy certainty that her brother and sister were both dead. There was nothing left of her hope, no feeling within her that said that Yirudex was near, no excitement over the promise of Jason's insights. Something was happening that had nothing to do with them, with her father, or with the life she had left behind. She almost asked for a tranquilizer spray, but she needed her head clear to find a way back to Station Gaea.

"Where are you going?" asked Yirudex, walking beside her.

"Home." Sopureh watched for the play of musculature under Yirudex's skin. Her sister might have been a floating statue for all the life her body showed.

"Home to Earth? To our training rooms and playgrounds on Sunset Station, or to the Muscle Shoals off of Jupiter? To Father up in Station Gaea?"

Sopureh stopped. "Shut up."

"You don't believe we're real, do you?" Jason

asked.

"Of course not!" Sopureh shouted, turning to the floating sled. "I shouldn't have come. I lost control. I miss you both so much I...wanted you back."

"We are here," Jason said. One of his arms reached out to her, its manipulator coming to rest on her shoulder.

"Where? On Garkain? In my head? I don't feel you like I used to. No, you're dead, the both of you. Gone. I have to go back, find something to do."

"What could you do without us? What can we be without you?"

"What are you getting at?" Sopureh stared intently at the A.I. console, hardly believing she was still conversing with her own hallucinations. Their presence tantalized her, encouraging her to fall into old patterns of relating: suddenly, she was feeling the pull of Yirudex's emotional appeals, thinking along Jason's logical paths. But habit could not replace the feeling of their presence inside of her.

"You see us, hear us. Felt my touch. You came to look for us and found us. We are real. We're here for you."

Sopureh looked to the boat. The dark, oval alien passed through the hull and floated beside the hatch. She sagged in the planetfall suit.

"Why did you leave me?" she asked at last.

"We didn't leave you," her sister answered. "We were summoned."

"By what? The aliens?" Sopureh asked derisively.

"One alien," Jason replied. "The planet."

Sopureh glanced instinctively at the suit's sensor screens. The storm eye had not shifted since her landing. The planet's natural forces had reined themselves in, remained stationary, as if under the control of a guiding intelligence. She stared at the alien by the boat, trying to understand what it was, what it meant. "There's no vegetation, no organic compounds," she said, even as a chill ran up her spine. She thought of the memories she had experienced before landing, the sense of something rummaging through her mind. "That thing doesn't even register on the sensors."

"The planet is not life as humanity has known it before," Jason said. "Your escort is just a small manifestation of the Garkain entity, a remote sensing device. It is what Lebi'D saw, what reminded him of his homeland's demons. Garkain sent it and others to the E-Con ships and bases, dissected the personnel through them. But they are not the alien Garkain. The real Garkain is all around us: organized electrical and magnetic activity, magma flows, tectonics, wind and ocean currents; self-enhancing, adapting itself to perform different processes. The alien artifacts -- the grids, floating islands, all the rest -- are the by-products of its thoughts.



This world is self-aware. It is conscious of other life forms. What it has been trying to do, simply, is communicate with us."

"All those missing crews, the bases....," Sopureh said. The spell of Jason's knowledge was strong.

"The entity is lonely," Jason continued. "It perceived E-Con ships travelling through Bubble Space and the minute electrical impulses of consciousness they contained. It tried to understand, to grasp the frail patterns of organic and machine thought, but didn't know how...it isn't social...it's having difficulty understanding groups, the dynamics of interactions...." A faint crackling, like distant static, consumed the A.I.'s final thought.

"Jason is not as...functional as he once was," Yirudex said. "Garkain wasn't able to absorb all of Jason's processes. Nor mine." For the first time, Sopureh detected a hint of sadness in Yirudex's voice. "Garkain could not replicate all of the subtleties...Garkain is too complex, too vast. It could only fit an insignificant portion of itself into our minds to try to understand us. It's like a human mind trying to understand the senses, instincts and thoughts of an insect."

"So you're ghosts." Sopureh backed away so she could keep them both in her line of sight. She remembered the chill of Yirudex's touch. "Why did you let it do this to you?"

"It needed us. When the storm came up, I felt its hunger. Lebi'D must have felt something as well when he followed the tachyon trail Garkain created as a signal to the E-Con. Sending his ship down the way he did, Lebi'D must have tried to join it, too. Garkain wants to communicate. I think we, the three of us, because of the way we were made, it can learn from us, use us to communicate to the E-Con, like tools...." Yirudex lapsed into silence. A frown creased her face.

Sopureh closed her eyes, trying to shut out the reminder of their father.

"I followed its call," Yirudex continued. Her expression was composed once more. "It was trying a new way to reach humans. It sent one of its remotes into Base Camp, found us, but didn't attack. I felt the thing in my mind, sorting through my memories. It found something it wanted. Our relationship, the way we relate, our empathy for each other. I understood that it wanted us to join it, merge with the planet system that is Garkain. A whole world, and we were to be its ambassadors to the human race. I had to fly into the storm. That was the way to join it. Jason warned me, and I overrode his attempt to take control of the ship. Maybe, if you had been there with us, we could have made a smoother transition into Garkain...it wouldn't have been fighting, disrupting its attempt to absorb and preserve our personalities and dynamics. It tries so hard to understand, but it doesn't know...it can't feel...."

"You're letting it use you, just like Father." Anger

surged through Sopureh. "Why did you do this to me? Throw both of your lives away...for what? Why did you let me come down?"

"Don't you see...it's a chance to communicate with an alien life form. I knew you'd come looking for us. With the dynamic complete, Garkain will understand, let us go out like its remotes, communicate with the E-Con through us. I didn't know it would...change us, but...it's worth it, don't you think?"

Sopureh's anger drained off into the aching pit of emptiness at the core of her self. "Do you miss me?"

"No."

This time, the tears that came to Sopureh's eyes flowed down her cheeks.

"Garkain is with us," Yirudex explained. "It's so vast, so complex...so strange. We're at the shores of an ocean that goes on forever. We can't see into its depths, we can't see the other shoreline. But it's everything to us." Yirudex paused for a moment, then took a step towards Sopureh. "Jason and I, our memories, they're not as they should be. The reactions, they're not the same. The subtleties-- you understand? So much is missing. Garkain fills the empty places."

Sopureh took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "Let me go back. I don't belong here. You don't need me. You're dead. How can there be the same relationship between us if you can't feel as you did, if you don't remember all we went through? Garkain's failed again."

"But you need us. Join us."

"I can't stay here. I would never survive. Let me go, let me tell the others about what happened."

"Would they believe you?" Jason asked.

Sopureh drew out the A.I. dopple. "Probably not. Let the dopple record something. Send a message." She inserted the dopple into a port in the A.I. frame on the sled. The dopple fell to the earth, passing through Jason's insubstantial body.

"Garkain took our ship *and* our bodies," Jason said. "There's nothing left of them. As for recordings, well, Garkain hasn't yet learned to contain its energies to allow for such delicate operations. We are...its best effort...at preserving records...our existence is fragile...we depend on it to...dream us. Let Garkain take you, Sopureh. Do not deny yourself."

The emptiness within Sopureh turned cold. "You're asking me to kill myself," she whispered. Sopureh felt the brush of alien logic against her thoughts.

"Garkain will take you in and preserve you," said Yirudex. "It learned from its mistakes with us. It wants you."

"No, I can't. Not even for you."

Readings on the suit sensors fluctuated. Dust devils whirled at the planetfall suit's feet. Lightning flashed erratically as the dome's ceiling lowered, and clouds curled and twisted along new wind currents.



"Don't you want to escape Father?" Yirudex asked. "Do you want to stay trapped for the rest of your life in his experiments? You know they'll come down looking for you. Garkain will not hold them off forever. What will you do back up at the Station, in the isolation wards and labs they'll keep you in for study?"

"Yes, I want to get away from Father," Sopureh said. "That's why I came down here. Without you, I'm all alone with him. But all you've done is run to another prison. A worse one. You can't come back up with me, can you? You're trapped on...in Garkain."

Yirudex's image wavered as the suit's radiation readings pushed up into the danger range. Her face faded momentarily, and Sopureh strained to catch a change in her sister's stony expression. Had she shown fear? She wondered.

"It won't let you go, will it," Sopureh said.

Jason answered. "We would lose...coherency...if we strayed too far...we're not like the remotes, too delicate...." His sled and A.I. frame shimmered.

"You're ghosts. Prisoners of the house that's trapped you. How can you want me to join you? I love what you were, the both of you. But you're not my brother and sister anymore."

Sopureh headed back for the boat. Jason and Yirudex trailed behind her. The alien at the boat moved to block the entry hatch.

Sopureh turned to Jason. "Are you going to take me by force?"

"No, we can't. Your resistance would ruin the process. The damage...you'd lose more of yourself than we did fighting each other."

"Then let me on board."

"The boat cannot make the return trip. And even if it could, the O.C. would shoot you down once you went beyond the planet's protection."

"Let me go."

The oval-shaped entity floated to the side and Sopureh entered the dark interior.

"You'll join us eventually," Yirudex said as she and Jason came through the hull. "As your power goes down and your air runs out, you'll weaken, you won't be able to fight. Garkain can keep the storm up that long. Before Father sends ships down for you, we'll take you in. Then you'll thank us. We'll be together again, and so much better."

Sopureh glanced at the weapons locker again. They were beyond her power to help. She could not put their restless spirits to rest. But she did not have to submit to the thing that had trapped them, either.

"I don't want to go back to Father," Sopureh said, stopping in front of the locker. "But I won't be killed and reborn into another experiment. I won't be a tool, Yirudex. I'm sorry, Jason."

She opened the locker and pulled out a projectile

weapon. The alien suddenly glided through the hull, its faint halo illuminating the boat interior.

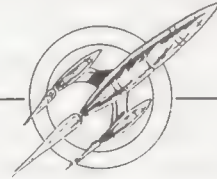
"No, Sopureh--" Yirudex cried out, reaching for her.

"Don't be so emotional--" said Jason, his image flickering.

Sopureh was careful to aim the gun at her forehead. She did not want Garkain to pluck anything useful from her mind before she died. To be sure the planetfall suit's armored visor wouldn't deflect the shot, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and put up the faceplate. As the cold metal touched her lips, she wondered if there might have been a chance to regain what she had had with her siblings. Doubt put a tremor in her hand, making the gun barrel shake against her face.

She opened her eyes to look for Jason and Yirudex. They were gone. Only the oval-shaped entity remained, halo shining brightly. Its fold was opening, its black surface spreading out to embrace her. Sopureh saw her father's face, her father's arms, his hands coming down to close around her and cut her off from everything she loved.

She wondered if her brother and sister were truly so far beyond life that they were content to remain as memories in an alien mind. She wondered if her act would show them a way to a final rest. Then she did not wonder any more.



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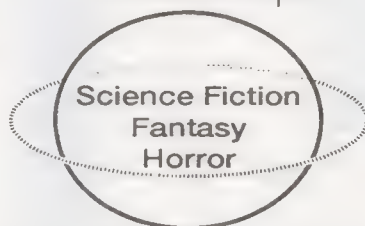
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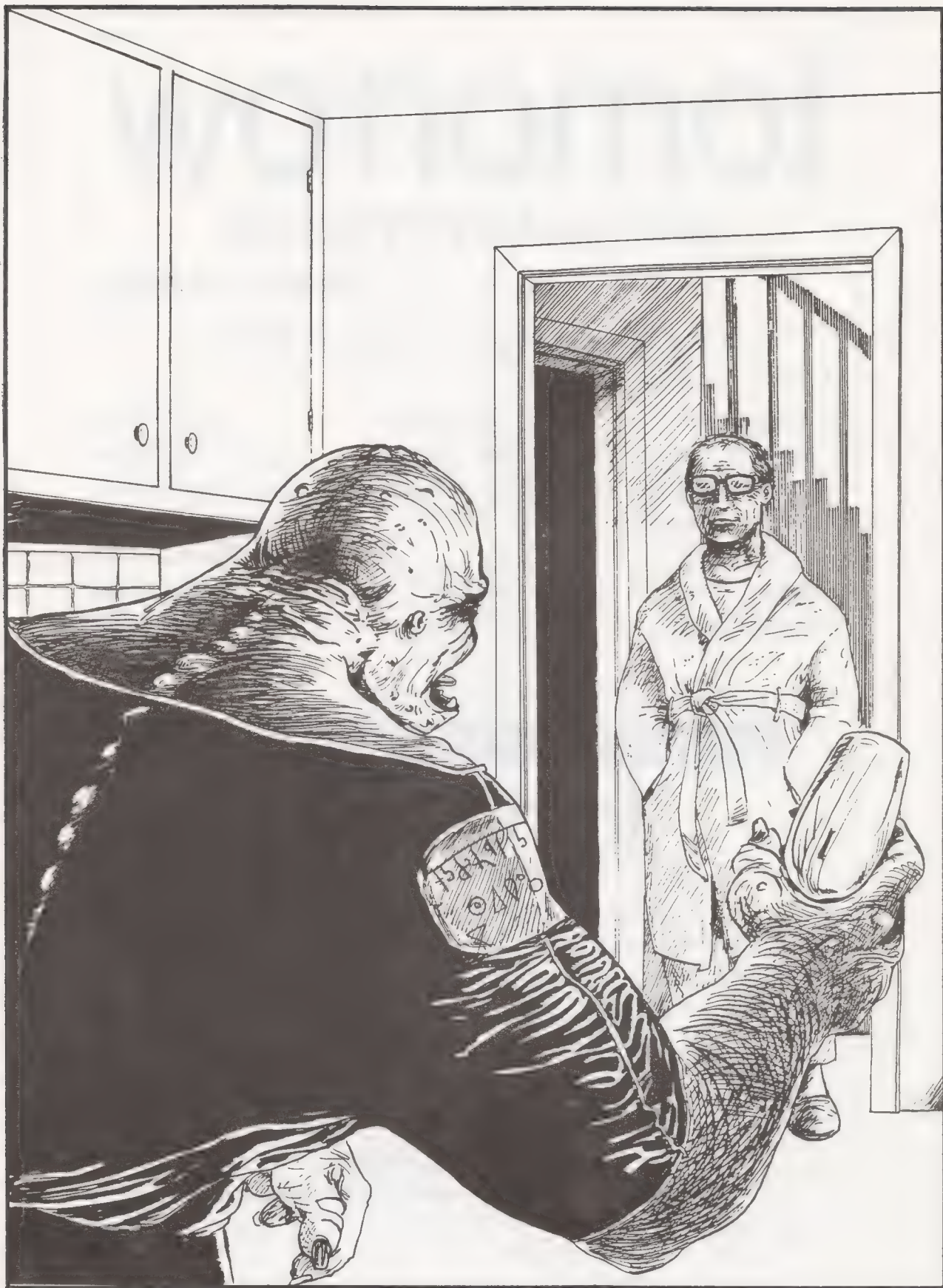
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# Option Four

by  
D. Douglas Graham

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The *Kloo* had four options:

Option One - He could take cover until the fire had reduced the small surveillance craft to molten slag.

Option Two - He could hasten the process by turning his weapon on the craft, eliminating the only scrap of physical evidence (apart from his actual presence) to indicate that it had ever been there.

Option Three - He could go strictly by the book, turning the blaster on the vessel *and himself*.

Option Four - He could attempt to put the fire out and accomplishing that, immediately evacuate the area.

The scout considered the choices available to him. Option Three would likely earn him a posthumous decoration and military martyrdom; Option Four, a summary court martial and disgrace.

He chose Option Four.

The *Kloo* made strenuous efforts to extinguish the blaze, but the heat was too oppressive, the fire too far along. Exhausted and heartsick, he slunk away and took shelter behind a fallen tree.

He'd barely escaped when the vessel had begun its careening descent toward the little blue planet and exploded into flame. What if it were consumed entirely, he thought as the heat raised blisters on his flesh. Would he spend the rest of his days here?

He did not permit himself to dwell on that dreadful possibility. Earth, with its cool climate, bland hills, forests, rivers and lakes, was no place for the likes of him. He belonged to the gray deserts of *Kwal-Gan*, the stark, impassible mountains, the comforting heat and aridity. He turned away from the scout ship as the flames grew higher, the fire hotter. All was hopeless. All was lost. Option Four had failed utterly. The *Kloo* protected his eyes against the terrible heat and brightness. Another difficult moment passed, then he came to a decision. No, he thought, chiding himself for his early cowardice. However grim his situation, he must not give in to pessimism. Pessimism and despair would kill him as surely as any fire.

Suddenly, there was a sizzling sound, a low, metallic moan, and an electronic shriek as the ship's circuitry fused together and the computerized guidance system expired in agony. As the vessel exploded, it spread its flaming entrails in all directions. The *Kloo* felt the impact like a hammer blow. The after-shock lifted him off the ground and deposited him a hundred yards from the crash site along with several pounds of glowing shrapnel.

He rolled deftly out of range of the flesh-searing wreckage, thanking the Creator-Demon *Awata* for *Kwal-Gan's* harsh terrain. It had made a soldier of him, a creature of iron will and constitution. He came to his feet and stared at the smoldering vessel, ignoring the cold, sinking feeling in his chest.

Surely something could be salvaged, he thought hopefully, as the flames slowly went out. Perhaps with crude materials the local environment would provide, the ship might even be rebuilt. The project would prove time-consuming and he would have to be exceedingly careful to avoid the skittish, soft-bodied creatures that inhabited this backwater world. But with pluck, verve and soldierly determination the feat might very well be accomplished.

He winced as the gadgets and circuitry that lay littered about the wreckage crunched and snapped under his feet. Every scrap of stray junk was potentially critical to getting the wounded vessel airborne again. The *Kloo* collected and stored away as many of them as he could, then, flaring his nostrils, he stepped away from the wreckage and raised his head.

There were food-scents on the wind and their source was not far off.

The ship had crashed in a clearing deep in the northern Michigan woods. A dense carpet of snow had contained the fire and kept the local population, sparse as it was, unaware of his presence. He was thankful to *Awata* for that enormous blessing. Had the soft-bodies witnessed the crash it might seriously jeopardize his



mission. The Lords of *Kwal-Gan* had a strong interest in Earth; in it's minerals, fossil fuels and other natural resources. The *Kloo* was to learn what he could of the planet's inhabitants, but diplomacy was not part of the agenda. He had not arrived to make friends with these repulsive creatures, only to make it easy for those he served to enslave them.

He gathered brush and fallen tree limbs to conceal the ship and beat a path out of the forest, the alien food odors leading him in a westerly direction. As the trees thinned out the *Kloo* became aware of a dim light. Obviously a dwelling of some kind, he reasoned, and in all probability an undefended one.

The *Kloo's* stomachs growled as he anticipated the meal to come. It would be so easy, he thought confidently. He would simply dispatch the inhabitants and secure from their home whatever he needed. There might be hazards, of course. The soft-bodies had mastered this world and were therefore probably capable of primitive self-defence measures. But, ultimately, they would be no match for him, even in formidable numbers.

Eventually he encountered a huge, three-story house with gables, turrets and gingerbread trimming. It sat alone atop a steep, rocky hill, bathed in moonlight and presiding over the surrounding countryside like a painted rural monarch. A sliver of gravel road broke through the trees several hundred yards away from where the *Kloo* stood. It's tortuous path up the hill connected the house to the outside world.

Very cozy, the *Kloo* though contemptuously as he regarded the enormous structure. He did not share the soft-bodies' taste for embellishment. On *Kwal-Gan*, houses were built to shelter one from the bandits and marauding predators. They were simple, impregnable, and utterly utilitarian.

But this soft-bodies' house, this was not simple shelter. Instead it was a kind of arrogant art form, a statement to all who saw it that the human residing behind its thin walls had nothing to fear from the world at large. How secure these creatures were, the *Kloo* thought, fuming at their impertinence, their infuriating complacency. Bringing them to their weak, cartilaginous knees would prove an exquisite pleasure indeed.

He bolted up the hill, flattened his body against the side of the house and moved slowly toward the back door. The windows remained dark. Nothing stirred within. No one had seen him coming.

It was all so easy, so ludicrously easy.

He was almost disappointed when he found the back door unlocked. The *Kloo* had hoped for a chance to test his mettle against the humans, but the battle would have to wait. A soft-body that failed to fortify his own dwelling against intruders would make for a most unsatisfying opponent.

He un-holstered his blaster and boldly entered

the house, following the food scents through a series of darkened corridors and large rooms filled with odd mementos and overstuffed furnishings. In nearly every chamber there were pictures of soft-bodies in gilded frames. The *Kloo* squinted at their faces, their strange clothes, bright eyes, smooth skins. *Awata*, he thought, how horrid these creatures were. Even by moonlight, they were perfectly terrible to look at.

The scent-trail finally led him to the kitchen. Inside was a simple hutch, an aluminum table and chairs, an old fashioned gas oven, and a small refrigerator. At least a hundred different knickknacks were perched on the shelves of the hutch or attached with magnets or tape to the walls and refrigerator door. The *Kloo* studied them closely; the ceramic depictions of small animals and juvenile soft-bodies, the crude crayon drawings, and the red cloth heart with "Love is Grandma" stitched across it in elaborate lettering. He could read the words-- the Lords of *Kwal-Gan* had insisted the *Kloo* study all the crude, soft-body languages-- but he could not completely grasp the meaning.

"Love", he comprehended in a cool, abstracted sort of way. But what, by all the dark mysteries of the Creator-Demon, was meant by "Grandma"?

The *Kloo* put his curiosity to rest and set about the business of foraging. He searched the cabinets first and found them filled with canned vegetables, the species of which he recognized from the pictures on the labels. These, unfortunately, would prove quite inadequate. The *Kloo* was dangerously low on protein. Only flesh would satisfy him.

Inside the refrigerator, he found a carton of milk, a few condiments, a brick of cheese, and a dish of sliced ham. He sampled the cheese first, since it resembled one of his favorite foods on *Kwal-Gan*. It did not live up to his expectations, however, and he spat out what was in his mouth and tossed the rest aside with a grunt.

The milk and condiments he decided against, but the ham looked and smelled promising. The *Kloo* took a piece and nibbled on it cautiously. Finding it tolerable, though a trifle too domesticated for his taste, he devoured every scrap on his plate.

The *Kloo* expelled a loud belch, then noticed a flash of movement in the doorway. An old man in a ratty yellow bathrobe was watching him, a bemused expression on his round face. He was well under six feet tall, balding, and wore cheap eyeglasses with masking tape in the hinges to reinforce them. The man snickered as the *Kloo* pulled his blaster.

Then he disappeared.

The *Kloo* lowered the weapon and blinked in dull amazement. The creature could be none other than the soft-body that occupied the house, yet how had it accomplished this miraculous disappearing act? Obviously the whole thing had been a trick. Rather than



face death, the creature had backed away and had only *appeared* to dissolve into nothingness.

He searched every room on the main floor, but found no soft-body cowering behind the furniture or lurking in the shadows behind the heavy panel doors. The second story was also free of soft-bodies. Of the three rooms he found there, two were obviously intended for sleeping. The other had dark drapery covering all four walls. A constellation was painted on the ceiling, though it was one he didn't recognize.

There was no furniture in the room apart from a ponderous walnut table. It was heavily carved and just tacky enough to have been in fashion at one time or another. On the table was a small, rectangular board. Its glossy surface was yellowish and inscribed with pictures, letters and numbers. On the board was a heart-shaped object just about the size of a soft-body's hand. The *Kloo* suspected the room and its ornaments had some religious significance, but as such matters were of little interest to him, he quickly left, closing the door behind him.

On the third floor there were two rooms. One was locked, but in the second, a woman of perhaps seventy years lay unconscious. The *Kloo* grinned malignantly and aimed his blaster directly at her head. For three minutes, maybe more, the weapon trembled in his leathery palm.

But did not fire.

The scout re-holstered his weapon, backed out of the doorway, and crept down the stairs. The woman was weak and helpless, he decided, and nothing would be gained by destroying her. As for the man in the kitchen, he had not existed at all and had only been a mirage brought on by stress and hunger.

The *Kloo* was overcome with drowsiness but did not want to sleep in some unprotected place where someone could easily sneak up on him. A closet-sized room on the ground floor offered the sanctuary he was looking for. He couldn't make sense of the hollow, water filled chair with its two hinged seats and lever, or the deep ceramic basin with the strange, metallic fixtures inside. Still, it was obvious by their design that both were purely functional, and he approved of that.

He tried to stretch out in the basin, but his feet stuck out and he hated the way his back felt against the cold ceramic. The floor he rejected for essentially the same reason. Finally, he settled for the chair.

He awoke, many hours later, to the sound of rushing water. Several moments passed before he realized what had happened. In his sleep he had leaned against the lever and activated the chair. Now it was hard at its purpose, which consisted of gathering water and flushing it away. It took only a moment of hard thinking to ascertain its *real* purpose, however. He would have to remember that chair, the *Kloo* thought appreciatively. Yes, he would very definitely have to keep it in mind.

The *Kloo* lifted the seat as the chair emptied itself and slowly filled up again. He didn't have time to ponder this marvel. All at once there were footsteps on the living room staircase; slow, labored, but definitely headed in his direction.

The *Kloo* stuck his head out into the hallway and caught a side view of a blue-veined ankle as it slowly started down the stairs from the second story landing. Time was even shorter now. He couldn't run and he had no place to run to. He was left with no other choice but to stand his ground. The *Kloo* bared his teeth and growled menacingly, but as he was about to pull his weapon, a voice popped into his head.

"Over here stupid," the voice said. "To your left."

He looked around, outrage smeared across his austere features. Who would dare...?

"Left, *left*, you scaly bastard! How'd you ever find your way to this planet in the first place?"

The *Kloo* cocked his head toward the kitchen, snarling when he saw the little man in the yellow bathrobe. So he hadn't been an illusion, he thought. Fine - he would take him now. Then he would dispose of his mate.

He bolted from the room just before the woman appeared on the stairway. The man in the kitchen greeted him with a smile that was both maddeningly enigmatic and slightly contemptuous. Then he disappeared again as the *Kloo* hissed and raised his claws to attack. A pace or two away a door suddenly opened in the floor. Behind it was a musty root cellar, slightly wider than a grave and a little deeper.

"Down here, pinhead," that same disembodied voice said tauntingly. "Haul ass!"

The *Kloo* stared uneasily at the darkness beyond the cellar door. Then he heard another voice. The old woman had finally made it down the stairs. Singing to herself in an irritating, high-pitched warble. She had not noticed him.

The *Kloo* acted on pure instinct and leaped into the cellar. The door closed quietly behind him and he could see nothing of his surroundings or of the soft-body that had encouraged him to take refuge here. It was cold, and the tiny room was permeated with strange, unappetizing odors.

Eternity crawled by as the *Kloo* huddled like a frightened rodent in the cellar's chilly blackness.

Then sleep took pity and carried him away.

He dreamed of his desert home, and there were tears in his eyes when he woke up again. The *Kloo* wiped them away when he saw the old man kneeling in front of him, wearing as usual the too familiar smirk, the ratty yellow bathrobe, and the cheap eyeglasses with masking tape at the hinges. For some reason, he felt no desire to attack the human, only to stare with wonder at the brilliant halo of amber light that surrounded him from bald head to



bare foot.

"Sentimentality?" the human said in the *Kloo's* own language. "That's about the last thing I'd have expected from the likes of you."

"I beg your pardon," the scout replied indignantly.

"The tears. Must've been some dream."

"A biological function," the *Kloo* protested, "a natural response to the humidity, the frigidity of this place."

"*Slasne*," the man said in perfect *Kwal-Ganese*, "I know tears when I see them and *spoorchu* when I hear it. I don't blame you for being sad, you're a long way from home."

The *Kloo* stared at the human, at his shimmering mantle of light.

"How is it you speak my language?" he asked, phrasing the question in the cautiously formal vocabulary one used to address a respected enemy.

The man's response was simple and shocking.

"I'm dead. It's amazing what you pick up when you're in that state."

"You mean you are a *hoosepa*?" the *Kloo* asked incredulously.

"Every bit of one for many years."

"But humans do not possess *cheespa*. How can this be?"

"Sure they do," the man protested. "I'm living proof...dead proof, rather. Anyway, can you say with certainty that *you* have *cheespa*? Think about it."

The *Kloo* thought about it.

"Do I?"

"Wait and see," the man replied with a wink.

The *Kloo* felt the old fury building up in him. His eyes narrowed with rage. His jowls burned with shame and self-recrimination. For too long he had huddled fearful and docile in this dark, damp place while this soft-body, with his trickery and clever talk, mocked and taunted him, and caused him to lose face. This human was no *hoosepa*, just an accomplished charlatan. He would pay the ultimate price for his mischief-making.

The *Kloo* reached for his blaster, then thought better of it.

"No," he hissed, raising his talons so that the man could see the length and sharpness of each claw. "I want to feel your flesh separate, hear the bones pop out of their sockets as I rip you apart."

"Oooh, that's really scary," the human yawned. "Keep it up and I'm liable to have another fatal heart attack."

The *Kloo* struck quickly and ferociously, but the talons passed harmlessly through his intended victim. The man shook his head as the fruitless attack continued. The scout lunged and retreated, lunged and retreated, then collapsed with a thud on the hard, dirt floor.

"Kill me," he said breathlessly. "Make a *hoosepa* of me so that we may fight on common ground."

"You moron! I don't want to fight you, I want to help you."

"Help me?"

"Help you. I saw you crash in the woods. I watched your ship explode. I know your whole story, pal. Now, do you want to spend the rest of your life on this mudball?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then pay close attention to what I'm about to say."

The *Kloo* dusted himself off and sat up rigidly, assuming as dignified a posture as his embarrassing circumstances would allow.

"No doubt you've noticed already that this house also has a living occupant," the man continued. "Well, that's my wife, or properly speaking, my former wife, Rose. Anyway, Rose hasn't done too well since I shuffled off this mortal coil. She's been trying ever since to make contact with me with the aid of spiritualists, crackpot mediums, and most recently, a quija board. Well, the bogus spook chasers didn't cut it, but the quija board? Bingo! She dragged me back here with that. Now I'm stuck. I can go anywhere I want to on Earth, but I can't return to the Other Side until she lets me go."

"You are her prisoner, then," said the *Kloo*, remembering the strange room on the second floor with the drapery, the stars on the ceiling, the table, and the board with the eerie symbols imprinted on it.

"Nothing like it," the man protested. "Rose isn't keeping me here deliberately. It's just that people in my situation— 'ghosts' for lack of a better word— are sometimes bound by the emotions of their surviving spouses, lovers, friends...whatever. Her affection for me has trapped me in life, but I've got no business being here."

"Reason with her," said the *Kloo*. "If that fails, demand that she release you."

"Oh, I've tried that," the ghost replied despairingly. "We've gone round and round on that stupid board of hers, me saying how it's killing me to be stuck here, her replying that I can't be killed 'cause I'm already dead. You see, Rose's got this thing about seeing me. She insists that if I materialize just one time, she'll let me shove off for good."

"Then your problem is solved," said the *Kloo*.

"Hardly, Rose can't see or hear me. I've wasted whole weeks waving my hands in front of her face and screaming my fool head off, but...zero, nothin'. No matter how hard I try, I just can't seem to manage it."

"Why not?" the *Kloo* asked. "I perceive you perfectly."

"Because Rose is human, and most humans can't sense ghosts. You, by contrast, are...whatever the hell you are, so the rules are different, I suppose. Now, here's my proposition: You tell me what you need by way



of parts and such to rebuild your ship, and I'll get them for you. Doesn't matter what it is or where I've got to go to find it; I've got powerful friends on the other side. All I've got to do is put in a request and it'll be instantaneously teleported to the crash site. In exchange, I'll borrow your body for a couple of hours-."

"You will do what?"

"I need your body, just for a little while. The idea is that when Rose breaks out the quija board tonight, you show up as me. We'll make this dramatic entrance, a tearful reunion will follow, then I'll get her to promise to let me go and the whole mess'll be done. Finished. Kaput."

"It is out of the question," said the *Kloo*.

"Don't worry, I'll take real good care of that ugly carcass of yours. You won't even miss it while it's gone."

"But she will see right away that I am not you," the scout protested. "I am not of this world, my appearance might...alarm her."

"No, it won't. Rose's got cataracts in her eyes the thickness of oyster shells. It's a miracle she can read the board, her vision is so bad. Anyway, the world's a blur to the old girl. We stay in the shadows, we got no problems...what'ya say?"

The *Kloo* carefully considered the offer. Could he trust this soft-body *hoosepa*, he wondered? What if the human had a secret ambition, a hidden agenda?

And if the lease on his body evolved into permanent tenancy....

The cellar door opened about an hour before sundown. True to habit, Rose had trudged upstairs to the seance room around seven o'clock. Standing at the bottom of the darkened stairway, the *Kloo* could clearly hear her obsequious entreaties to the distant and exotic land on the Other Side. Her raspy voice rose and fell with great emotion as she begged an audience with the taciturn spirits.

"Her devotion is impressive," the scout said, uncomfortably attired in the tight-fitting suit, bow-tie, wing-tipped shoes and eyeglasses the ghost had teleported to the cellar so that the charade might be pulled off more effectively.

"Wait'll she gets ahold of somebody," the spirit replied. "Rose'll start wailin' and moanin'. And that thing she puts her fingers on-- a *planchette*'s what they call it, I think-- that'll glide across the board like it's racing day at Indianapolis. You just hang on, 'cause the show's just starting. Sparks are gonna fly, yessir."

In due course, Rose did make contact with something. Her voice throbbed with excitement and there were a series of explosive THUMPS as the seance table levitated itself a few inches from the floor and dropped back down again.

"Is this your work?" the *Kloo* whispered uneasily.

"Probably an elemental," the ghost replied.

"Probably a whole tribe of the damn things, actually. Don't sweat it though. Your average elemental is harmless, and cottage cheese has a longer attention span. That bunch she's got upstairs will retire before long. Then we can get down to business."

The ruckus in the seance room soon went from mildly interesting to downright irritating. Finally Rose demanded in a tone that would brook no argument that the delinquent spirits quit her house. The spooks obliged her instantly. With an indignant BUMP the table dropped to the floor.

"That's our cue," said the ghost as he laid a hand, so light and insubstantial that it could barely be felt, on the *Kloo*'s back. "I've never done this before, but I imagine it'll hurt you a hell'va lot more'n it'll hurt me."

"Wait," the *Kloo* sputtered, but it was too late for protest or negotiation. The little man in the ratty bathrobe had already slid into his body. The *Kloo* experienced the invasion as he imagined he would his own death. Without warning he was put out of control of all his physical functions. He was conscious. He could see, feel, and hear just as he always had. Yet he could not guide, only witness, the action of his body. He watched helplessly as the ghost drove it up the stairs to the murky, candle-lit room at the end of the second floor hallway.

Rose was hard at it. Since the elementals had gone she had hunkered down on her work, hoping for a more fruitful contact with a more interesting personage; namely, her husband. The *Kloo* felt himself stop just outside the door. There was a slight tingling in his head, a subtle linkage-- like electrical circuits interfacing. At the same time, the planchette embarked on a slow but very determined course across the lettered portion of the board. It settled first on 'H', then 'E'. In time it had spelled out -

"Hello."

"Hello yourself," said Rose, as though she'd just picked up the telephone receiver and not immediately recognized the voice on the other end of the line. "And who am I speaking with please?"

The planchette got busy again. It went back to 'H', then on to 'A' and 'R'. When it finished it had spelled out -

"Harvey."

Rose gushed with satisfaction.

"What took you so long, Dear?" Were you chasing away those naughty elementals?"

Harvey lied.

"Kicked their asses," he boasted.

Rose scowled and rapped her fingernails against the planchette.

"I don't care if you *are* dead, Harvey Sloane," she scolded. "I will not tolerate that kind of talk in this house. Do you understand me?"

Slowly, somewhat sullenly, the board replied-

"Won't happen again."



The *Kloo* stayed in the shadows as the strange conversation continued. Each time the planchette moved, he experienced again that vaguely unpleasant tingling sensation. The feeling lifted the instant his body began to move forward. The *Kloo* stepped out of the shadows into the seance room where Rose was hunched over the table. "Yes, oh yes," she said, her eyes fixed on the board as the planchette skittered merrily from letter to letter.

When Rose looked up, the *Kloo* was standing in the doorway. Against his will his mouth popped open, his esophagus trembled and his thick tongue struck his palate in totally unfamiliar ways. He felt and heard himself speak, but the language was English, expressed perfectly and without an accent. The voice belonged to the soft-body *hoosepa*, the creature known in life as Harvey Sloane.

"Remember our deal, Rosey," the Sloane voice said as she drew near. "I've lived up to my part of the bargain. Now you've gotta do the same."

Rose was weeping.

"I can't," she said.

"We'll be together soon enough," the voice continued reassuringly. "Believe, Rosey...just believe."

Rose's expression suggested that even now, belief did not come easily. Hope and blind faith battled with bitterness and loneliness. Then her shoulders sagged with resignation, her resistance slipped away, and she looked at the man in the beast with eyes that seemed to say: "You're right, of course, we will be together again..."

"And soon, very soon."

Rose sighed and returned to the table. She picked up the board, stared at it for a long, unhappy moment, and broke it over her knee.

"I keep my promises, Harvey Sloane. This is going in the trash tonight! Now you get back to the Other Side and I'll see you...when I see you."

The *Kloo* felt the tingling again.

Then he and Harvey backed quietly out of the room.

The *Kloo* returned to the ship, where the ghost released him. When the exorcism was complete, he stretched his limbs, flexed his muscles. Everything seemed to be functioning properly, perhaps even better than before. He shed the stinking soft body ensemble and slipped into his uniform again, vowing to scrub the man-smell from his flesh at the earliest opportunity.

Harvey was sitting on a stump, scowling as the *Kloo* began to fuss over the scout ship.

"Better hurry up and fix that thing," he said. "I imagine your bosses will be anxious to hear your report so they can get on with that invasion business."

The *Kloo* stared speechlessly at the human *hoosepa*. His arms lost their strength, his knees ached, his legs became gelatinous. The scout had said nothing,

done nothing to show his hand, yet his entire plan had been compromised. The *hoosepa* had known everything, *everything*-- and probably from the very beginning. A single word was all he could muster in reply.

"How...?"

"As I've already pointed out, the dead are highly psychic," said Harvey. "I can read your mind and your heart, see your thoughts and spit 'em back at you in your own language. I suspected your motives from the start, but I was so hungry for your help that I deliberately blocked the transmission and conned myself into believing you were here to collect plant samples or something. Once I crawled inside your head, though, there was absolutely no denying it. The plan was plain as newsprint. I read the whole paper from cover to cover, and brother, that was some story."

"But surely it makes no difference," the *Kloo* argued. "Thanks to me you are free of Earth. Why should its fate matter to you?"

Harvey seemed genuinely offended by this rebuttal.

"I may be dead, but I'm still a good American!" he retaliated. "Besides, there's Rose to think about. What happens to her if your buddies show up one day to take the place over?"

"But...but..."

"Nothin' doin'," said the ghost. "Deal's off!"

The *Kloo*'s strength abandoned him. He sank to the ground, shoulders trembling, chest heaving. Harvey stared in complete amazement at this intensely emotional display.

"This isn't such a terrible place," he said a little more compassionately. "I spent sixty-four years here and it wasn't a bad ride at all."

"But the soft-bodies will kill me," the *Kloo* replied breathlessly. "My parts will be on display in your museums. My heart, lungs, genitals, preserved in glass jars. By *Awata*, I can't bear the thought of such a thing."

"Pretty short on balls, aren't you, son?" Harvey said, not intending humor. "I suppose that's why you didn't ice Rose when you had the chance. I could've stopped you at the last minute, of course, but fortunately for you, that wasn't necessary. You just don't have the killer instinct. I'll admit I'm grateful-- but grateful or not, I can't let you go home. It's that invasion thing. I can't get past it."

"Then my fate is sealed," the *Kloo* moaned despondently. "I will be an outsider, a pariah in this land. I will have to live apart to live at all. Better death than that, human. Much better..."

Harvey frowned. He owed this guy big time, and on that score, the fact that the *Kloo* was an extraterrestrial from a hostile planet with invasion on its mind mattered not a fig. A debt was a debt, God damn it, and dead or alive, Harvey Sloane paid his debts. He tapped his foot



impatiently, his mind intensely focused on the problem.

"We can solve this," he said. "We gotta be creative, but we can knock it out!"

"Anything," the *Kloo* replied, "That keeps me from the scalpel."

Harvey nodded, liking the thought that had suddenly flashed in his mind. Liking it very much, in fact. It solved a lot of problems, that thought. Yes indeed!

"Let's discuss this," he said.

The *Kloo* had four options:

Option One - He could put an end to his captivity by simply quitting the house and living off the land. Spring had come and gone and the weather was steadily improving. The television newscasters were predicting a blistering summer, which for a *Kwal-Ganese* in exile was very good news indeed.

Option Two - Harvey was due in another month, at which time the *Kloo* could try negotiating with him again. Yet even after many years the ghost was still unwilling to provide the materials that were needed to rebuild the ship. "What about the invasion?" he would ask with tedious predictability. How could he trust the *Kloo* not to pass on the intelligence he had gathered about Earth to the greedy Lords of *Kwal-Gan*?

But the aging rulers of the *Kloo*'s home planet had a limited attention span. By now they had completely forgotten about him and Earth. The *Kloo* had explained this to Harvey over and over, but always to absolutely no avail. The human *hoosepa* could be damnably stubborn, and he wasn't about to give up a good thing when he had it.

Option Three - He could hurry Rose along her march to the grave. But how? Harvey was good-natured, but he was also powerful, and occasionally even dangerous. He was always watching, always hovering somewhere nearby and would almost certainly appear the moment he laid hands on the woman's leathery old neck. Option Three was definitely out of the question. It wasn't safe even to consider such a thing.

Option Four - He could lay low and simply accept the hand that fate had dealt him. Rose could not live forever, no matter how much her health seemed to improve day by day, month by month, year after excruciating year.

Taxing as the arrangement was for the *Kloo*, it was terribly convenient for Harvey. He could slip into his body as easily as he could an old overcoat and did so frequently—especially when he wanted Rose "in the family way". The *Kloo* found these sessions quite unbearable, but Rose suffered through them almost gracefully. She didn't seem to mind the hardness of his alien form, it's hugeness, its overbearing maleness.

Dear, long-suffering Rose had never complained. Never once.

Option Four made sense. It was safe in the old house. Safe, warm and comfortable. The food wasn't bad, he was learning to enjoy television, and Harvey's liquor cabinet (which Rose kept generously stocked) provided an interesting diversion from time to time. The *Kloo* spent more of his time in the cabinet these days than he had in the beginning—more time all the time.

Feet stretched out before him, the *Kloo* carefully went over his options. The weather was warming up, just as the broadcaster had promised. The sun was bright, the sky cloudless. It was shaping into a tolerable day.

As he sipped his lemonade, he wondered what would happen if some soft-body, a child perhaps, maybe even one of Rose's grandsons all the way from Arizona or Oregon, dropped in unexpectedly and saw him like this: stretched out in a cozy wicker chair on the sagging front porch of this old house. Would the kid scream? Run away? Alert the authorities?

Would anyone believe him?

Rose came out of the kitchen a short time later and plumped down next to him. After a minute or two had passed in amicable silence, she smiled her secret smile, reached over and took his paw. The warrior felt the familiar panic welling up in him.

Intimacy again? *Awata* help him!

Clearly this provocation demanded a stern answer, but Harvey could not be far off. The *Kloo* could sense him in the wind, see his face in the puffy white clouds, hear his voice in bird calls and the abrasive buzzing of the ubiquitous summer insects.

Yet, his liberation could be achieved so easily. One swipe of the claw, one blow, and he would be free...free!

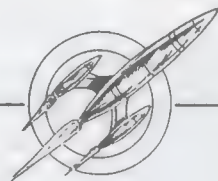
One blow....

As if in reply, a hot wind arrived out of nowhere. Fierce as a *Kwal-Ganese* gale it blasted the porch for a single second, then continued on a crazy, zig-zag path back to nowhere. Rose had barely felt the wind, but the *Kloo* had become very nervous, for just below its shriek a chuckle could be heard.

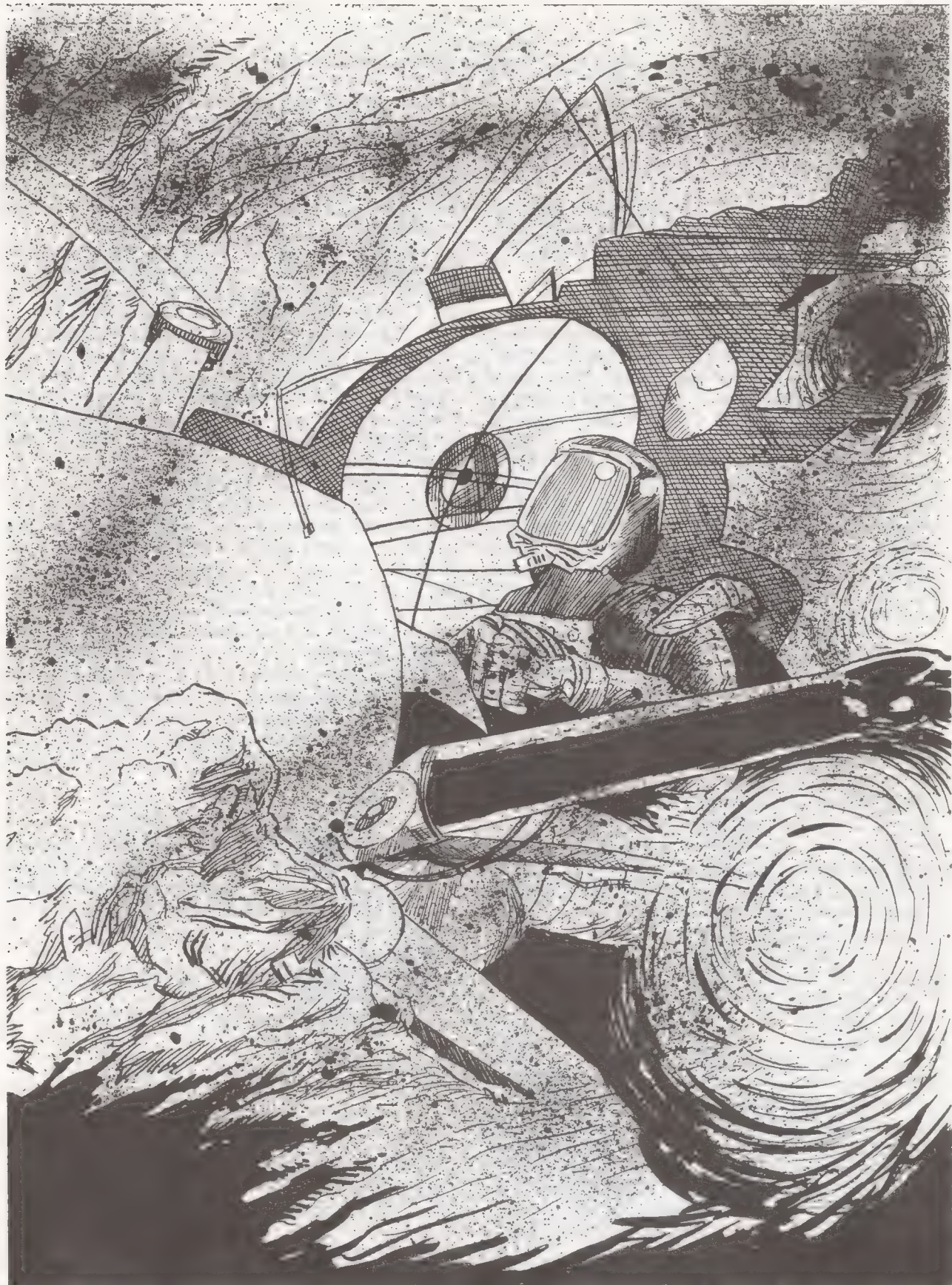
A warning!

Rose giggled like a school girl as the *Kloo* took her liver-spotted hand.

Squeezing it gently, he chose Option Four.









# Digging Out

by  
Jessie D. Eaker

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Henry Devit winced as the loud static screech of a comm emergency override issued from his suit phones. "Henry!" His wife's voice came to him painfully loud through the static. "Get the hell out of there!"

Immediately the comm burst into the drone of many people talking at once. "Unauthorized communications!" yelled his own comm support. "Ignore previous trans until caller request can be confirmed."

But Henry was already in action. His wife was a commtech herself: one of the best, cool in any situation. But the tone of her usually controlled voice spoke to him louder than words. Something was very wrong.

He slammed his gloved palm into the emergency stop, killing the power to his digging equipment. Immediately, the blinding white work lights dimmed to filaments of dull orange, plunging the tunnel into darkness. Henry's world narrowed to the thin swath of reality his helmet lamp sliced from the blackness. As the machine ground to a stop, the normal vibrations transmitted through his feet ceased, leaving him with only the drone of his spacesuit's circulation pumps -- and his own accelerated breathing.

He released the lifeline and jerked his feet from the position restraints, almost sending himself spinning in the asteroid's near zero-g. He steadied himself, turned, and leaped head-first down the middle of the laser-straight, two kilometer long excavation he had been carving. A lone beacon at the tunnel's mouth showed him the way.

Suddenly, the wall on his left soundlessly bulged and exploded. Faster than Henry could register what was happening, the chamber filled with dust, rocks, and boulders. He frantically tried to dodge the larger pieces, but an unavoidable boulder plowed into him and threw him against the tunnel wall. His head cracked against the inside of his helmet and he lost consciousness.

The day before, Henry had sat alone at a tiny table in the station's only lounge, waiting for his wife to go

off-shift. He'd been given plenty of invitations to join his friends at the crowded bar, but this evening he was too uptight to socialize. He needed time to himself. The upcoming equipment trial worried him.

Henry glanced at his watch and shook his head. Ruth was late again. Not that he was surprised: She was a conscientious commtech and her supervisor sometimes took advantage of her dedication, giving her emergency assignments at the last moment. Henry would have told him where to go a long time ago. But even-tempered Ruth took it all in stride without it ever seeming to bother her. He'd found himself quite a bargain in that woman.

He smiled to himself. She was more dedicated and patient than he deserved. Even though she desperately wanted to begin a family, she had delayed her wishes and followed him out to the asteroid belt...so he could dig holes. He hoped he didn't let her down.

As he watched the flow of traffic through the bar, he mentally ran through the checklist one more time, searching for something he'd missed, some weak link. The electrostatic charger, his grand experiment, had been checked more times than he could remember. He felt confident that keeping the dust away from the cutting bits was the answer to reaching break-even. It just had to be.

But doubt tugged at him. *Don't mess with the dust*, the old timer had warned. *Don't mess with the dust*. But when questioned, the man had walked away without giving a reason, refusing to say more. Henry shook his head. The guy had to be crazy.

Just then, Ruth plopped down in the seat across from him, jerking him out of his thoughts. "Hi hon," she said, "I hope you haven't been waiting long. I had a last minute priority message and the supervisor *had* to have it decoded before I left."

Henry grinned playfully. "Listen woman. I'll have you know that I've been waiting in this hell-hole for over an hour...and you haven't even bothered to kiss me!"

She grinned, leaned across the table, and gave him a deep kiss. "Better?" she asked when their lips



separated.

"Much," he said, and then sniffed the air. He leaned towards her and sniffed again. "Is that perfume I smell?" He looked at her in surprise. "Where did you get it? It smells wonderful!"

Her eyes sparkled, pleased with his reaction. "It's called *Rage Nights* and I got it from Judith, my section leader. Since she's leaving on the next shuttle, she let me have what was left in the bottle."

"Well, it's a definite improvement from breathing canned air all the time. I wish we could afford these things." He leaned forward and drank in the fragrance his wife wore so well.

Ruth took his hand between hers. The grin faded from her face and her brows wrinkled slightly. "Henry," she said, her tone serious. "There's been a lot of talk in Comm lately. And I think you've attracted the eyes of the Company." She licked her lips. "I'm not sure this trial is such a good idea."

Devit shrugged. "It's not like I'm keeping it a secret. Besides, with you running comm for me, I have nothing to worry about."

Out of the corner of his eye, Henry saw someone step up to the table. "Excuse me," said the newcomer.

Henry looked up to see Meyer Williamson, the new relations manager, standing beside their table. *What the hell is he doing here?* Henry wondered. Managers didn't usually come to the tunneler sections. It wasn't illegal, but it did deviate from the social norm -- especially with the current relations between management and workers. Something was up.

Meyer nervously licked his lips. "I just wanted to wish you luck on your trial run tomorrow."

Henry didn't answer, only stared at him coolly.

Meyer leaned closer. "I'm on your side, you know. I hope you reach break-even." Meyer looked over his shoulder at the crowd in the bar. "I'm endangering my position just by being here. But I have to warn you about the others within *Infinite Resources*. They want you stopped and they're not above causing you problems."

"Problems?" Henry's eyes narrowed. "What kind of problems?"

"You know. The life threatening kind. There are a thousand ways for a man to die while tunneling. You're a brave man, Devit. Just don't be stupid." Meyer gave one last nervous look around the bar, and left. Henry silently watched him leave.

"That wasn't an idle threat," Ruth said. "They mean business." She looked at her hands now pressed flat on the table. "*Infinite Resources* doesn't want you to reach break-even. They like it as it is."

Devit shrugged and turned to face her. "Doesn't matter what the company wants. Someday, someone will dig tunnel and be able to cover their expenses. It might not be me and it might not happen for a hundred years,

but someone will do it. And once you can tunnel and make money, then it opens up a whole new frontier."

She leaned forward. "Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying? Put your brain in gear, Henry. They mean business!"

"It's just idle threats...."

"No, it's not," she interrupted. "You're going to get your stupid ass killed. I don't want you to die out there. And this damn break-even isn't important enough to die for."

He shook his head. "But our future depends on it. If we stay out here too long, then the solar wind will blow away our hopes for a family. Can't keep the old gonads shielded in lead forever."

"She gritted her teeth and blinked at the sudden tears in her eyes. He had hit a nerve. "I know that as well as you do. But getting yourself killed is not the answer."

"Then what is the answer!?" he was shouting now and drawing the attention of the others in the bar.

"Quitting!" she shouted back. "Maybe it's time we stopped fooling around and went back home!"

"What!?" Devit blinked in shock. "I can't quit now! You know I'm not a quitter!"

"Then maybe it's time you learned." She stood up and started towards the door, but stopped and turned. "And by the way, find someone else to run comm for you. I won't help you get yourself killed."

Groggily, Henry tried to touch his aching head, but something was in the way. He did this several times before he finally realized it was his helmet. He was still suited up and floating freely. Memory returned in a rush.

Outside, it was black. The only light came from the HUD inside his helmet. Miraculously, the indicators were all green except one nonessential system -- his comm was out of contact. He sighed. A bad sign, since it took several meters of rock to block out the signal. He was on the wrong side of a blocked tunnel.

Despite this, Henry marveled that he was even alive. Had he pushed off just seconds later, the collapse would have crushed him. As it was, his pressurized suit had saved him untold damage by acting like an overblown balloon. When hit, it bounced.

Henry felt down his suit's chest plate for the helmet lamp switch. He flicked it on and off several times with no results. It was broken. Reaching out slowly, Henry touched what he believed to be the tunnel wall just below him. He grabbed it, stabilized himself, and tried to remember the location of his equipment: under him, over him, or completely buried? For all he knew, he could be entombed in a pocket of rock with no hope of escape. He shuddered at the thought.

Reconstructing the events in his mind, he decided the equipment had to be on his left, provided the tunnel had retained its general shape. He carefully began



crawling around the curve, and after only going a meter, bumped into one of the machine's legs. He climbed the support, found the operator station, and by touch, oriented himself to the control panel. To him, it was upside down.

He found the emergency stop switch and reset it. The work lights immediately filled the tunnel with their harsh white glare, forcing him to blink back stinging tears, and driving home the seriousness of his situation. The tunnel he had so carefully crafted was a disaster. Debris choked the entrance.

He was alive...but trapped in his own tunnel.

Ruth Devit was also aware of the seriousness of her husband's situation. And had it not been for her quick intervention, he would have died.

Although she had sworn she wouldn't, she had been monitoring the communications traffic near the asteroid. Henry had gotten another off-duty tech to run comm for him, one she knew was not very good.

She had about decided that Henry was going to be okay (damn him for being right), when she picked up an odd communication, encrypted, and aimed into empty space.

*What was that?* she wondered. Nothing out there that she knew of. Since she worked in communications, she quickly identified the encryption technique as one reserved for high-level management commands. Her heart jumped up into her throat. Something was not right.

Risking her job, she used her sup's authorization (which she wasn't supposed to know) and decoded the message. To her horror, it commanded one of the renegade killers -- intelligent missiles intended to remove asteroids with erratic orbits -- to change course....

And destroy the rock containing her husband.

Without thinking, she keyed an emergency override to warn her husband, and nearly simultaneously, transmitted a self-destruct sequence to the renegade killer. But the self-destruct command did little to help. The missile exploded with full force a mere hundred meters from the tail end of the asteroid.

With tears in her eyes, she monitored the incoming reports: the asteroid was still intact, but it appeared that the tunnel had completely collapsed. Ruth jerked off her comm set and went to see her team leader. She was going out to where her husband was buried.

Henry Devit sighed as he examined the wall of rock completely blocking the tunnel. It had been one hell of an explosion. He knew that *Infinite Resources* had to be behind it. Accidents of this magnitude just didn't happen. Henry grinned. The collapse was the perfect irony -- he had not achieved the needed tunneling speed and was still far shy of break-even. The company had nothing to worry about.

And then a chilling thought occurred to him. Maybe his tunneling speed had never really been the issue. Maybe the company wanted to make him an example of what happens to tunnelers who try to beat the system. Rock the boat and the company gives you the hatchet. Henry gritted his teeth. If he ever got out of this mess, he was going to make such a stink they'd smell it all the way back to Earth.

He turned back to his machine and started towards it, determined to just wait for rescue....

But he froze when he saw the large dent in his digger's oxygen tank. *Oh no!* He scrambled towards it and carefully examined the tank. To his horror, there was a finger-sized hole.

He immediately pulled a suit patch from his pouch and slapped it firmly over the hole. But even as he did this, he knew it was useless. There had been no resistance. He leaped to the equipment's controls and read the air gauge: zero. Nothing but vacuum.

*Dammit! Damn the company to hell!*

He glanced at his suit's EC, his own breathing loud in his ears. He had enough left in the suit pack to last four hours, and with the emergency recharge on the digger, that would give him another eight. Twelve hours total. Which meant waiting for a rescue party was out of the question. It would take that long to just get a damn digger out to the asteroid. No, it looked like he was on his own.

He did some quick mental calculations. If he could achieve his normal pace, he could cut through about a kilometer of rock before his oxygen ran out. He activated the digger's on-board computer. Using pulsed vibrations, it was able to construct a three-dimensional picture of the asteroid's interior. Henry was surprised to find the asteroid retained its general oval shape -- roughly 2.5 kilometers in diameter and five kilometers long. The tunnel itself had completely collapsed beginning fifty meters behind him and continuing for at least a kilometer. Unfortunately, the two kilometer area of the old shaft was now shot full of fractures, making it extremely unstable. He didn't dare go back. A tunnel carved through there would surely collapse on him.

The three kilometers straight ahead was out of the question and the one and a quarter to either side wasn't much better. All were out of range. It appeared hopeless. As a last resort, he superimposed a sphere of one kilometer radius over the diagram of the asteroid.

*Bingo!* An ancient crater lay at a sixty degree inclination ahead of him. It brought the surface within 1.1 kilometers. Damn, it was almost there. If he pushed his equipment to the max...and took shallow breaths...and if God smiled on him, he might make it-- just barely.

He quickly made his decision and began preparing the digger for the workout of its life. Miraculously, everything appeared intact, except for a few



dents and the busted oxygen tank. But there was one problem: the dust.

Basically, the tunneler looked like an insect holding an open umbrella before it. Supporting the motors, power plant, and controls were five legs (the insect), which gripped the tunnel walls and provided forward movement. Attached to the center section was a large wheel (the umbrella), containing numerous grinding bits that rolled over the rock surface. The asteroid material -- formed directly out of cosmic dust under low gravity -- was brittle and broke up into a fine powder. This allowed the extracted particles to be funneled through conduits in the wheel and ejected through a half meter diameter waste pipe.

The problem was with the waste pipe. Since the blockage had severed it, the particles were going to stay in the tunnel instead of dumping into space. Henry didn't think it would pose a major problem, but things were going to get real dusty.

Determined to give it his best try, he positioned himself, started his equipment, and began digging as fast as he dared. Soon he had settled into the comfortable routine, and without even thinking about it, kept a practiced eye on the bits heat sensors. Something he had learned the hard way.

When he had first arrived, Henry had mistakenly believed that you could mine to the maximum speed of the machine. So, he went out and bought the fastest machine he could find. But, as he found out during his first dig, it was not the speed of the machine that determined how fast you could tunnel. It was basic physics. Heat to be exact.

The grinding of the rock generated heat, and in a vacuum, the heat would build up in the bits. The machine absorbed as much through the wheel as it could, but there was a limit to what it could handle.

If you worked too slow, then you couldn't cover the expenses of air, fuel, and comm support. If you worked too fast, you burnt up the very expensive bits. Either way would seriously deplete the meager salary *Infinite Resources* paid. Theoretically, the tunnelers were paid a salary plus the market price of the improved asteroid -- depending on whether it became a station or a transport. But tunnelling expenses were astronomical, hovering right around the asteroid's price.

However, if you could somehow tunnel faster without burning up the bits, then you could cover your expenses and still have money left over from the asteroid's sale. The break-even point. Something no tunneler has ever reached.

Henry was the only tunneler to soup up his equipment and try to achieve break-even. His first inclination was to use volatiles to cool the bits, but they were just too expensive. Further research led him to suspect that dust collecting on the bits contributed to heat

buildup. So, he added an electrostatic charger which would repel the particles and hasten their journey out the exhaust. Too bad it hadn't worked.

But at least he had tried. Of course, Ruth was the one who made it possible. Without her income, he never would have been able to pursue such a project.

Henry longed to hear Ruth's familiar voice on the comm. He wished they hadn't argued. He couldn't help but wonder what she was doing.

Ruth Devit stood on the surface off the asteroid that encased her husband, chewing out Meyer, the public relations manager. "There's no excuse for this, Meyer. How the hell could the company allow a renegade killer to hit an inhabited rock? Heads are going to roll, if I have any say so in the matter! If you didn't want him to reach break-even, then break his machine, but don't blow up the whole damn asteroid!"

"Now calm down Ruth," Meyer's face was pale and drawn through the suit's faceplate. "I had nothing to do with this. And I especially have nothing to do with the direction of the renegade destroyers. I have no idea why a robot would decide that this particular piece of rock was out of orbit."

Ruth bit her tongue and stopped her verbal attacks. If she said too much, she could get herself in trouble. Besides, This was not the man responsible. He seemed as horrified as she was. She softened her voice. "Have you got the pickups set yet?"

Grateful that she had settled down some, he nodded emphatically, almost casting himself adrift in the slight gravity. "Yes, we have. From what we can hear, your husband's equipment has restarted and has been running now for just under twelve hours. We think this means he's still alive and trying to dig out."

"Aren't there any other tunnelers in the area that could help?"

Meyer shook his head in his suit. "Fredrickson's on his way, but he has to come all the way from his D5 rock. It'll take him fifteen hours to extract from his tunnel and get here. I'm afraid he won't do us any good."

She looked away for a moment and then asked, "What are Henry's chances?"

Meyer clasped his hands in front of his chest, like he was praying for her not to explode again. "As best we can tell, he's a little over a hundred meters deep. Making some best case estimates on his oxygen supply...it'll be close."

"In other words," she accused, "he won't make it." Meyer stood perfectly still and then slowly nodded.

An alarm sounded in Henry Devit's suit: only thirty minutes of oxygen left. He did his calculations again. By his estimate, he would live until there was about fifty



meters of rock left to go, an additional twenty-five minutes of digging beyond his air supply. So close. He had pressed the machine as much as he dared, but he couldn't get any more speed. And to make it in time, he would need to go twice as fast. He imagined his machine continuing on automatic and digging to the surface, with him dead, strapped to the control center. At least they wouldn't have to dig for his body. He wondered if it had even been worth the effort.

He mentally shook himself. He was not a quitter. Although his situation continued to look bleak, he would not give up.

Henry leaned forward and wiped off the thick dust on the temperature readout. The dust was very thick now.

As his tunneler chewed up the rock, the inside of the chamber had filled with dust. First becoming a fog across the work-lights, then gradually becoming denser until he could no longer see them, only their glow diffusing through the chamber. Already it had begun coating his suit, face plate, and instruments, forcing him to wipe them off whenever he needed to take a reading. Fortunately, the electrostatic device was keeping the dust away from the bits. His experimental device was getting a real workout.

What really mystified him though was the dust's behavior. He'd expected it to clump towards the larger mass of the sides, but the rotation of the wheel apparently caused a disturbance. Instead, the dust whipped around, forming a kind of vortex behind the wheel. And as he looked closer, he could see it forming currents and eddies just like a river on Earth.

Ah, back to Earth. How he wished he could be there and see its warm beauty just one more time. He and Ruth used to go to the river when they were dating and sit out under the sun. Fresh air and fresh water: what more could a man want? He especially liked walking out on the boulders above the water and observing the river flow around them.

Why, right now it looked like he could be beneath that flow, with the light shimmering off the surface, and the underwater currents sliding past the hard rock.

Underwater!

Henry blinked at the idea forming in his mind. He put his faceplate to the gauge and read the bit temperature. Maybe there *was* a way out.

Ruth Devit, who was listening to the steady amplified sound of her husband's tunneling equipment, fought to keep her emotions under control. It was only ten minutes ago that, through the pickups, she had heard the machinery change to a higher pitch. Henry had sped up his machine, which meant he was making a last ditch effort to dig out before he used all his air.

"Are you sure this is where he's going to break through?" she demanded of Meyer.

"From what we can determine, it's about ten meters up ahead."

"Shouldn't we have medics available in case he does come through alive?"

Meyer turned away. "The medics have been assigned to an emergency over in E7."

"And why the hell is that!"

"Because Henry died as soon as he sped up his digger. His machine can't take it!"

Henry began to gasp for breath. There wasn't much air left. He had made sure of his position restraints when his final oxygen alarm had gone off. His last thought as the blackness closed around him was of swimming. He smiled to himself.

"He's just under the surface, and coming fast!" shouted one of the technicians.

"I thought you said he wouldn't come through for another thirty minutes!" Meyer yelled back.

"I don't understand it! His digger should have overheated...."

But he didn't get to finish his sentence, because the ground in front of them began to vibrate and finally dissolved into a whirlpool of dust and rock. Out of it rose a phoenix of metal, spinning and whipping the dirt into space.

Mindful of the low gravity, Ruth scrambled towards it carrying a spare suit pack. She squeezed between the rapidly spinning wheel and the edge of the rock to catch onto a leg of the machine. Then, she leapt for the limp body of her husband. Knowing that replacing the suit pack would take too long, she unfastened the tube from her own oxygen supply, jerked his out, and inserted it into his slot, flooding the interior of his suit with fresh air. She wiped the thick layer of dust from his faceplate and put her helmet against his. "Henry!" she shouted. "Can you hear me!" She shook him. "Henry! Open your damn eyes!"

Agonizing heartbeats passed with no sign of life. Then she saw his eyelids and heard a tiny groan through the touching helmets. Music to her ears. "Henry, you're alive!"

He slowly smiled. "God, your suit smells good. A hell of a lot better than mine."

Tears of relief began to collect in her eyes. "They said you were as good as dead when you sped up your digger."

Henry only grinned and held a single finger in front of his faceplate, indicating quiet. "Help me replace this suitpack," he said into the comm, then clumsily reached out and flipped off his suit comm. He indicated she should do the same. She looked at him questioningly, but did as he requested -- replacing his suitpack and restoring the feed on her own while she was at it.



When she was finished, he brought their helmets together. "I didn't want them to hear....but I figured it out. I finally did it. And I owe it all to your love of the water."

"I don't...."

He held up a hand. "You see, the dust that collected in the tunnel, it behaved just like water would in a river. It kind of *flowed* around the chamber."

Ruth shook her head. "Henry, you're not making sense."

Undaunted, he continued. "I always thought the dust collecting on the bits made them overheat, and to a point, this is true. But seeing the dust flow like that got me to thinking. Maybe I could use those tiny particles as a coolant. So I turned off the electrostatic charger and guess what? The temperature of the bits dropped. The particles were acting just like a liquid!"

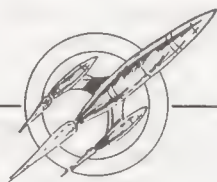
Ruth's eyes went wide. "You mean...."

Henry smiled broadly. "That's right. I reached break-even speed. We'll be out of here in no time and on our way back to Earth. And you, my dear, will be a mother before you know it."

Ruth hugged him, suit and all.

Henry released himself from the digger, shut the equipment down, and took Ruth's hand. She stopped him at the edge and put her helmet against his one last time. "Henry, I'm glad you didn't give up -- that you kept trying."

Henry put his arm around her suited form. "I'm glad too, honey. I'm glad too."



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# Anthony Veldt II, Too

by

Mark Lax

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Happy birthday to me  
 happy birthday to me, too...  
 Moustache, chocolate frosted  
 says I slept in the lab  
 alone again.  
 Conclude the maid awoke me.  
 Haze parted while trudging down the hall.  
 Trudging down the hall, concerned;  
 couldn't tell you why.  
 Employees meet without greeting me:  
 I'm not that kind of guy.  
 No one says "Hi Tony"  
 or "How do you do?"  
 or "What's it like today  
 being 42?"  
 Not that I'd answer...  
 Too busy  
 trudging down the hallway  
 concerned before I know  
 what about.  
 Memory fills, haze now parted  
 shoves fixed set the reason.  
 Have to get back to the lab.  
 Have to beat the widget.  
 Time block says wait for time block  
 that says that's what  
 I can do.  
 Time block says not now.  
 To the roof pad,  
 to the chopper,  
 To away I go,  
 taking me, too.  
 Seeing clouds between the blade's swish.  
 Whisk to the medical centre  
 for my medical day.  
 Arrive on time, as per usual.



Then, the doctors make me wait.  
 Whip out pocket planner.  
 Adjust time block envelope slate.  
 First, cardiologist declares pacemaker normal.  
 Normally keeping pace  
 as if 'pacemaker' could be 'normal'.  
 Second, specialist treats with drugs  
 that liver I drank away.  
 Third, physical terrorist twists and chums:  
 I squeal, but I'll heal  
 from what Debbie II did.  
 I try not to think about Debbie II.  
 She tries, I'm sure, not to think of me, too...  
 I never loved her,  
 so I can't hate her--  
 still I wonder,  
 do they sedate her?  
 Have to get back to the lab.  
 Have to beat the widget.  
 Time block says not now.  
 Chopper touches Veldt Citadel's pad.  
 I leave, trailing brooding flunkies  
 issuing disquieting talk of banks.  
 Stinking little reject men  
 deodorize my life.  
 In the boardroom, my boardroom  
 I evade, curtail, cancel, delegate.  
 Detached is what they view.  
 I don't care what they don't see...  
 They cajole, repel, reprise, relegate.  
 Confusion, it looks to me.  
 They don't care what I don't see...  
 "Science is our business."  
 I say this once, twice, three times...  
 Time block says that time block's over  
 and I say 'Thank God'.  
 Explode into the lab.  
 Back to this world that's mine.  
 My sanitized battlefield  
 where I mine my mind;  
 and there it hovers, spinning.  
 Mocking me.  
 It's a piece of a part of a thing that I'm making;  
 or should I say should have made by now...  
 But the whole project's stalled  
 because the widget won't go  
 where it's told so.  
 It rotates rapidly, repetitively, redundantly  
 mocking me,  
 resolutely defying all known laws of physics:  
 an outlaw chunk of the inanimate,  
 crafted with my hands,



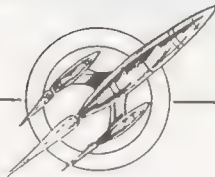
born from the sweat of my digits,  
and there it stands  
staring at me from all angles  
with its fly eyes.  
And there I glare back.  
Then my mentality clears.  
Boils down to a contest of wills.  
I do nothing  
for there is nothing there to do.  
Then time block says that time block's over.  
Damn.  
The only peace I'll have all day.  
Social life begins  
time block says.  
Most people think of such times  
as times when people are free.  
Unfortunately  
my social life  
has little to do with me.  
It has something to do with dinners  
which I attend for thousands of dollars per plate.  
Everyone invites me...  
My work is in magnetic field manufacturing.  
It's the only way America can compete.  
Machines which work to build more machines.  
It's the future I make.  
Politics is business,  
and politics is still gears and bearings and grease,  
and cash is the grease,  
and I grease everyone,  
even people who stand in my way.  
Right, left, weird, whatever--  
You have the cause, I have the cash.  
I attend as a zombie  
bringing my mantra in tow:  
"The service economy is bullshit. A country which makes nothing,  
has nothing."  
So I dance up to whomever  
is holding this shindig for whatever  
and say my mantra for all to hear.  
Then I speak it to two other people  
who grant me the lease of their ear.  
I say it once, twice, three times...  
and sit down.  
"Tonykins, Tonykins," she greets me as she's been told.  
Her name is Muffy or Buffy or Jody or Julie or Debbie  
or something atrocious like that.  
I stop what I'm saying and I sit and I chat.  
She drops names that I'm supposed to know  
while mingling in her own pretensions.  
I think she was a model once.  
They're all models turned singers turned actresses

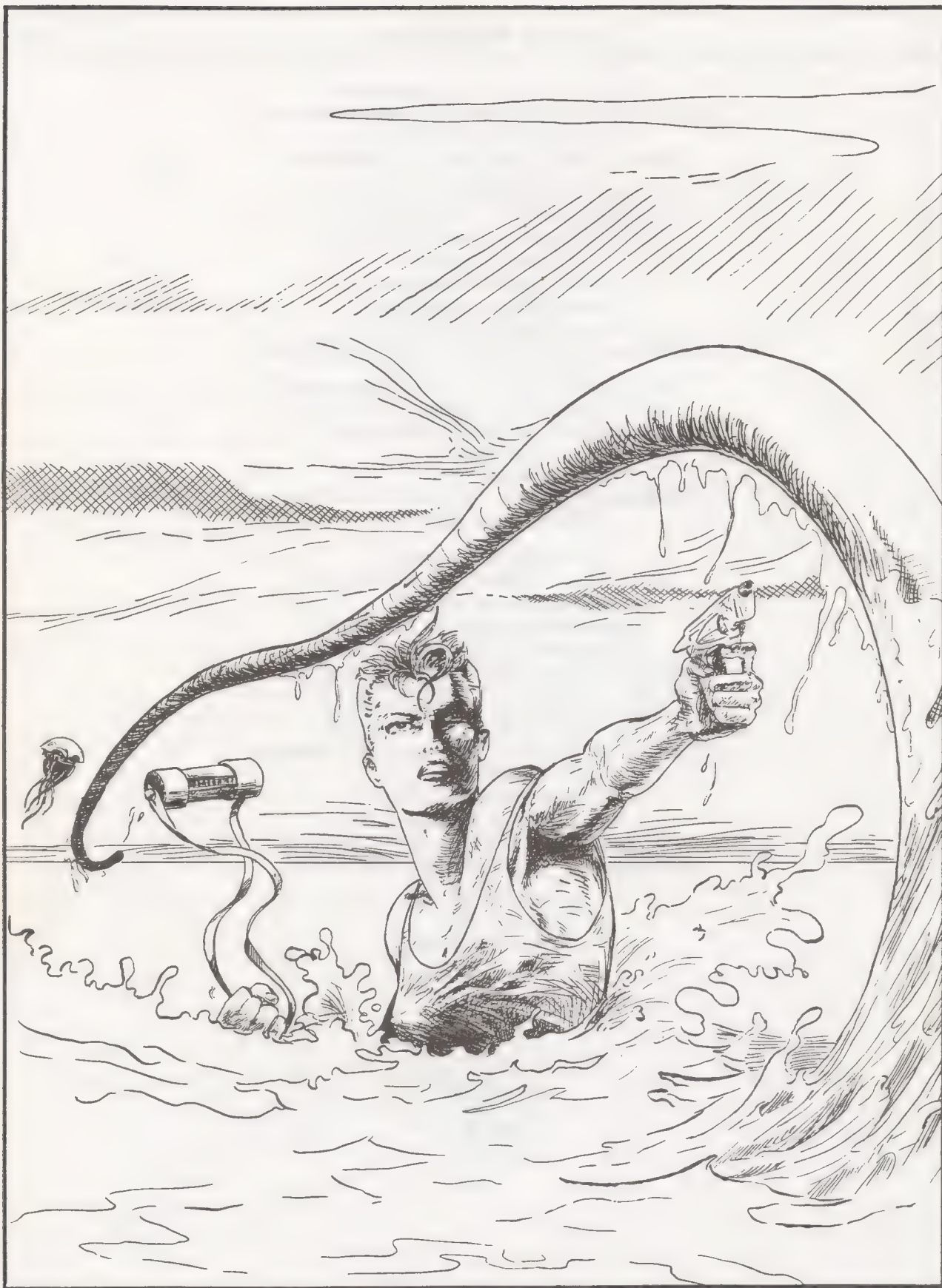


turned into Tony's toys...  
 I pierce her eyes and see the widget spin.  
 This is something that I've imparted,  
 since nature abhors a vacuum  
 and I've dated and mated every model  
 in the Hoover family.  
 between gulps of rubber chicken 'cordon bleu'  
 she purrs the inanity of her life,  
 and in-between that, she sputters 'culture house.'  
 She says this once, twice, three times...  
 This is the third time she's said this three times.  
 I can take a hint. It's already arranged.  
 'Culture house' means Paris.  
 A week for shopping and a week a month later for fittings.  
 Time blocks are set  
 so I spring my surprise...  
 And she's happy...for a minute...  
 Time blocks wind down  
 and I'm back at the Citadel  
 alone again.  
 I fear this time of day above all.  
 Never have been able to set in for sleep.  
 Stay aware until I plop.  
 No more booze for Tony,  
 so I have to create something to bust me.  
 I'm lucky that I have it.  
 It's forty stories up. In its own special hanger.  
 And there my baby floats--  
 all yelling yellow with a blazing blue belly  
 and a gleaming green cabin on her downside.  
 This diversion will end, since she'll be everyone's tomorrow,  
 but tonight she's still mine.  
 Activate the retracting doors.  
 The windy city's wind blows in.  
 She doesn't budge an inch until I'm in her cockpit,  
 nestled behind her controls.  
 Up and out.  
 Chicago's broad shoulders soon streak beneath  
 held aloft by sturdy shocks of strong steel.  
 We soar over the Sears Tower,  
 past the Hancock Building, and around  
 the Paul Bietler Tower, tallest building in the world.  
 Entertain thoughts of buzzing Kenosha,  
 then other thoughts intrude.  
 They're brothers, really...  
 Things that intrude when nothing else wants to intrude.  
 That's the base of my fear. No control. At all.  
 First, I think about what they named this thing:  
 I spent 700 grand and got a cartoon blimp with a smile face  
 and the word 'Unitile'.  
 It's not a blimp, it's a zeppelin.  
 Spent years getting the rights for neutralized hydrogen.



15,000 orders. The first one rolls tomorrow.  
Everyone will know 'Unitile' then. Her clones will fill the air.  
They'll be as common as bulldozers.  
Accountants tell me that the first one cost the most.  
The rest are produced at cost.  
If that's true, then this is 24 billion I'm joyriding in.  
Her sisters cost a few mil. Lots of profit built in.  
And she'll make money for whoever buys her.  
This one I call Debbie II.  
Debbie II thought it was a blimp, too.  
Never bothered to correct her.  
She was here when I built the cockpit.  
She gave accurate meaning to the word 'cockpit' that night.  
I don't know what went wrong.  
The smell was in the air: excrement of our efforts.  
I went to get her a drink, she went for her purse.  
I looked back, she had a gun in her hand.  
"Tonykins?"  
"Put that down!"  
"You're not going to forget me. I'm not one of your toys. I'll be  
with you the rest of your life."  
Bang.  
She was right: I'll never recover.  
She was wrong: That's not how you kill a Veldt.  
And I've seen it done...  
It was my summer break, my junior year.  
A baker had made me a special cake:  
wide enough for seven rows of candles, six rows deep.  
I had it on a gurney. I wheeled it into Dad's lab.  
That's where he was supposed to be found,  
But he wasn't there -- not at first glance;  
then I rounded his desk, empty booze bottle on it; he was on the  
ground,  
his hands clutched to his chest,  
a dried drool stream decorated his face.  
It was the only time I'd ever seen him smile.  
I never got the chance to say "Happy birthday father"  
or "How do you do?"  
or "What's it like today  
being 42?"  
Not that he'd answer...







# Nicor Sapiens

by  
Kate Baer

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"The transponder signal is still ambiguous," Limpet said with mechanical unconcern.

Nyssa stopped for a moment to wipe the sweat from her forehead and neck, sinking a good three inches into the muck as she did so. Cursing, she pulled her feet free. The only way to keep the swamp from swallowing you up was to keep moving, but hours of trudging through waist deep water were beginning to take their toll. Her entire body ached from the exertion -- the fact that the gravity on this hell-hole of a planet was one and one half again as strong as Terran normal didn't help matters either.

She had been involved in military campaigns on high gravity worlds before, back when she was in the marines, Caddis V hadn't been a picnic. However, she also hadn't just been through a crash landing at the time. Now she felt like she was about to drop.

The air was hot, almost unbreathably so. Every now and then, something unseen and unnamed would brush against her leg beneath the brackish surface, leaving her with her blaster warily trained on the various nebulous ripples which were nearby. With any luck, whatever it was would turn out to be vegetarian and smart enough not to mistake her for a turnip.

"Am I still headed in the right direction?" She asked Limpet, who floated just behind her right shoulder.

"I would have informed you if we got off track." Limpet replied tersely. Nyssa bit off an angry reply; yelling at an NAI was an exercise in pointlessness. Limpet was her only hope of getting off this planet. He had managed to download a basic topo map during their hectic plunge to the surface. That, combined with his radio locator, would hopefully get her to the nearest outpost. There she could summon help.

She looked up at the shifting tumult of reddish yellow which seemed to fill the sky. That magnetic storm was making matters difficult. Limpet couldn't manage to get a precise fix on the outpost's transponder with its interference. Finding it might turn out to be quite a task.

If only the ship hadn't sunk into the mire so quickly. A flyer would have made things much easier. The mad scramble had forced her to make some hard decisions. As it was, she'd only had time to grab the cryo-chamber and a blaster. For some reason, Limpet had taken a stun rifle.

He looked awkward carrying it. His floatation system was close to its weight limit. A jellyfish with a shotgun, his metallic 'tentacles' glided just above the swamp water. He wasn't designed for this kind of environment, his body just being that of a modified utility 'bot. Aside from navigating, she wouldn't be able to count on his help much.

Limpet swiveled his IR laser and fired a particularly nasty looking bug which was headed for Nyssa's face. It burst into flame and fell into the water, landing with a sizzle.

Well, he *was* doing a fairly good job of keeping the insect population under control, she had to admit.

Because of the stifling heat, Nyssa had been forced to strip down to a minimal amount of clothing. This left her fairly open to the attacks of various blood-suckers, flesh-eaters, egg-layers, and the entire class of insect which bites and stings without any apparent motive. Limpet deterred most of the small ones with a weak magnetic field he generated around them. The larger ones required more forceful persuasion.

Nyssa paused to adjust the jury-rigged carrying strap of the cryo-chamber. The small package wasn't heavy, but it definitely wasn't designed to be slung around a human hip. Still, since the only hope of recouping her losses on this fiasco depended upon its well-being, she kept it well secured. Fortunately, the chamber was designed to travel. Under the present circumstances, it would be impossible to keep it dry and level.

She squinted her eyes in an effort to find the horizon through the orange/yellow haze that passed for an atmosphere. She hoped to see some sign of the mile high, needle-like transmitter that marked the location of the

outpost.

"It doesn't seem like we're making any progress through this soup," she said.

"We have come fifteen kilometers in a more or less straight line since we left the ship," Limpet said, "there is a 65% probability that we are headed directly towards Outpost Delta. I could raise the accuracy of my vector even more if I could obtain a wider parallax. Perhaps if I went on ahead...."

"No!" Nyssa snapped, "we stay together."

"With my inertial locator, I can guarantee that I would be able to return here without difficulty. You have nothing to fear. Splitting up gives us a greater probability of reaching our objective."

Nyssa shook her head. "Limpet, I would sink into the muck up to my ears if I stood here waiting for you. I have to keep moving."

"Oh." Limpet said nothing more for a few moments while Nyssa forged ahead. "Perhaps you could walk in a circle while I...."

"No!" She yelled. Limpet didn't seem inclined to inquire again. Nyssa shook her head. She was letting fatigue get to her. She shifted her attention from the NAI to the increasingly difficult task of moving forward. The muck seemed to be getting thicker.

She had picked up the cryo-chamber two weeks ago on a frozen snowball of a world whose name she couldn't recall. The only remarkable things about her charge had been the package's small size and who was paying the bills. The Alcon Corp wasn't exactly lacking in either money or resources.

"This is it?" She had asked incredulously when Parker, the company's representative, had handed the small cylinder to her.

"It's not the size of the package which matters, but what is in it," he said, dragging casually on a nicstic. She hadn't thought much of the gleam he had in his eye when he said this. She ignored it.

"What is this?"

"Just think of it as a high priority popsicle," he replied. In response to her wordless glare he cleared his throat nervously and added, "um, specimens. I'm afraid I can't tell you any more. You don't really need the details, do you?"

"No. It just seems odd you don't send this in one of Alcon's armored carriers. Why hire a stranger?"

Parker looked uneasily around the dark, deserted hangar. He shook his head, then smiled. "Sometimes strangers are the only ones you can trust." Before Nyssa had a chance to respond, he had turned to leave. "Besides, I know your rep; you always come through for your clients."

Except this time, it seemed. A courier job had its inherent risks, pirates being among them, but she knew

how to avoid them. She didn't use standard routes or defense systems.

This time, however, they knew exactly where to find her and precisely how to incapacitate the ship, forcing her down.

*Sometimes strangers are the only ones you can trust.* She was beginning to wonder what Parker had meant by that. Was he worried about someone stealing his precious package, or was he doing the stealing himself? It hadn't really mattered to her at the time; a contract is a contract. Now she wished she knew.

After almost an hour of walking, she suddenly realized that Limpet had begun talking to her. She half turned her head. "What did you s--?" Her last word was lost as she found herself pitched forward into the water. Her foot hadn't found ground where she was expecting it.

With considerable splashing, coughing, and swearing, she managed to get her feet back onto something moderately firm. She stood and tried to clear her lungs of the foul tasting water. Limpet repeated himself, "the bottom slopes away rather sharply up ahead."

She fought back the urge to burn the NAI right there and then. "Is there anything else you would like to bring to my attention, now that you have it? She asked with a barely controlled voice.

"Yes. You are sinking."

"I...*hate* this planet!" She pulled her legs free and moved away-- she hoped-- from the ledge's edge. "Which way now? Or do I swim?" She wiped something slimy from her hair.

"Apparently we are on the bank of an underwater river. I am unable to determine its width from here. Perhaps if I went on ahead...."

"Forget it. Guide me parallel to the bank. I'm sinking again." The NAI floated past her and began leading the way. "There has to be someplace where we can ford it," she said.

"Not necessarily...."

"Shut up."

As the day wore on, the magnetic storm overhead waxed and waned. Sometimes it appeared to be little more than a red-tinted lightning storm; at other times the entire sky seemed to be bleeding a hellish crue. The most unsettling characteristic was that the entire process was silent; not even a faint rumble made it down to the surface. To Limpet, however, the electromagnetic spectrum from infrared on down was filled with a cacophonous roar. His filters were top of the line, but he could still only catch the slightest ghost of a signal from the outpost's beacon. Were Limpet's components electronic, like most standard Nav units, the interference would have sent him into catatonia.



Nyssa could see why various elite corps used this place for survival training.

As they moved downstream, she began to see various currents and eddies in the water around them. The river was apparently getting narrower. Unfortunately, that also meant that the current would be picking up. While the water was still moving fairly gently where they were, Limpet confirmed that it was fairly swift midstream.

"Your pace has slowed considerably in the last hour," Limpet added.

"Yeah, well you try sloggng through this muck," she snapped.

"You are obviously reaching the limits of your endurance. I would recommend that you rest before continuing."

"And just how would you suggest I accomplish this without drowning?" She asked. Limpet was silent for a moment.

"It would be best to find some land above water level."

"No shit. There any nearby?"

"Yes, on the other side of the river the topographic data shows a general rise in elevation, enough so that there should be dry land. While I cannot confirm our exact location, there is an 80% probability that we will encounter some surface break within two kilometers."

Nyssa shaded her eyes against the hazy glare. "I don't see anything...."

"Detailed visibility is currently at 1000 meters with the humidity. Any proturusion is not likely to rise more than a few centimeters above the surface waters. I would be very much surprised if you *could* sight it. Nevertheless, it is there. Only the exact location is currently in question. If you would allow me to scout ahead...."

"Forget it," Nyssa cut him off. "I'll take your word for it. So, are you suggesting I swim across the river?"

"No, in your current fatigued state, the current would likely overtake you."

"So how do you suggest I get across?"

"Perhaps if you got some rest first you would be able to cross upstream where the current is gentler."

"Limpet."

"Yes."

"Just shut up." Limpet was a Non-Algorithmic Intelligence...and sometimes it showed. Give him atypical problems and his logic got choppy.

However, he was right. She needed rest to get across the river. It wasn't his fault that the only way she was likely to be able to *get* any rest was by getting across the river first. It was nobody's fault, it just meant that she would continue walking until she finally fell and was unable to get up. Then she would drown.

"I'll be damned if I'll let that happen...."

"Let what happen?" Limpet inquired.

Nyssa realized she had been thinking out loud. "Nothing."

*Come on, girl! You can do better than this!* She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Eight years in the Colonial Marines, serving from the Core to the Rimworlds, fighting in every conceivable atmospheric condition, should have taught her *something* she could use here. Hell, she'd been on similar worlds before; wouldn't be surprised if she'd been *here*, but when you've been on hundreds of worlds, most for not more than a day or two, they tended to blur together.

Leaning back, she tried taking some of the weight off of her feet by floating. Unfortunately, in the waist deep water, her boots lay on the mucky bottom when she relaxed her legs; the high gravity was once again making things difficult. If she stayed in that position for too long she would probably end up completely mired.

"Damn boots are too heavy."

"I could discard the rifle and carry your clothing," Limpet offered. Nyssa paddled herself backwards a stroke.

"I think that's what we'll have to do." She didn't relish the idea of exposing even more skin to the attentions of the insect population. However, most of her body would be in the water, and it might greatly increase her endurance to shed the encumbrance and drag of her boots, water-logged clothing, and the cryo-tube.

Even so, she wondered how revitalizing a rest it would be...it was hard to float at 1 1/2 gees. A relaxed body sank.

She looked at the stun rifle; an idea occurred to her. "How much does that thing mass?" she asked.

"17.75 kilos, far more than your baggage, I assure you."

"Let's try something else first. Drop the stunner." Limpet did. Nyssa got back to her feet and faced the floating 'bot. She took two of his tentacles and placed them around her shoulders.

"I cannot carry you, you are too heavy," Limpet protested.

"I don't want you to carry me, just keep me afloat. Make sure you cradle my head." Limpet tightened his tentacles around her. When Nyssa was satisfied with the arrangement she leaned back into the water. "Just keep my head out of the water and stay moving so I don't get mired."

"Will this arrangement work without damaging you?" Limpet asked.

"Damn well better."

"What vector should I follow?"

"Back upstream where the current was gentler." Limpet began towing Nyssa's limp form. She tried to spread out her limbs and act as much like a raft as she could. Her feet still dragged lightly across the bottom, but the forward motion kept them from sinking in. "Wake me

when we get there," she said jokingly.

Despite the fact that Nyssa had only intended to relax, sleep did come. Her body had been in high gear ever since the first warning claxons sounded.

The alarms went off within three hours of settling into orbit. She had been waiting for the arrival of her contact.

A ship came in-system and approached while transmitting the appropriate security code. The delivery portion of her job looked like it would soon be accomplished. Then alarms began to blare.

"High-velocity projectiles have been launched by the incoming ship. They are on an intercept course," Limpet said in a hurried, but unemotional voice. He was positioned on the main console, his tentacles jacked into the small craft's various systems.

"Take evasive action!" Nyssa cried as she wrestled with her restraint harness. The command was unnecessary. Limpet was already firing the retros in an effort to change the ship's vector.

"Maneuvers ineffective. Insufficient delta-v to avoid the projectiles at this range. Prepare for impact," Limpet said.

Nyssa glanced up at the holodisplay. If she couldn't avoid a collision, at least she could try to get as much of the ship between her and the objects. Reaching forward, she unlocked the gyroscopic controls. With one deft motion, she rotated the ship about its center of mass so that the main drive unit, the most heavily reinforced section of the craft, would be hit.

She never felt the impact, just a dull blackness which hit with a compressive thud.

Limpet managed to guide the ship into the atmosphere before the attacking ship had a chance to position itself for another volley. The remaining retros were just enough to make a moderately controlled re-entry. It was a miracle he had managed to get it down as anything other than molten slag.

The swamp had claimed the ship almost immediately. The breach in the hull was big enough to allow the muck to flood into the aft compartments. Nyssa had regained consciousness just in time to grab the cryo-chamber and scramble out the hatch with Limpet right behind her.

Presently, she awoke— something half-realized danced at the edge of her perceptions, rapidly fading even as she grasped for it; like when someone wakes from a dream as real as stone, only to find it evaporate before them like mist in the morning sun. Something was nagging at her, begging her to notice, but she couldn't place what it was.

Limpet interrupted her reverie. "This is one of the calmer stretches of the river."

Nyssa came fully awake in an instant. Limpet was still supporting her head and chest. She knew where she was and what was happening, but there was a moment of disorientation before she responded.

"How long?" She asked.

"Two hours twenty-seven minutes travel time. Walking is considerably faster," Limpet responded.

"Okay, let me up." Limpet let his tentacles relax and rose into the air. Nyssa stood up; her back felt stiff, but she didn't feel the same kind of fatigued clumsiness she had before.

She reached down and checked the cryo-chamber. She could feel the faint hum against her hip, which meant that the device was still busy keeping the contents frozen.

"How far?" She asked, leaning forward into the water. She tried for an easy, graceful stroke, but quickly found her face underwater. She came up sputtering.

"Approximately four thousand meters at a vector roughly perpendicular to our ultimate direction of travel. Try shorter strokes, you will require more of a downward force to stay afloat in this gravity."

"Thanks." She said sardonically. She began swimming again. Limpet led the way.

He hadn't exaggerated when he said a greater downward force was required. She ended up doing a stroke which resembled the dog paddle more than the breast stroke. Before long, her muscles were burning.

At first, the current didn't seem to be a problem. All at once, the water pressed hard at her side; she had to struggle to keep from being flipped over. After a moment's panic, she compensated and continued a steady progress. Fortunately, the current didn't intensify any further.

The disheartening thing was the fact that she couldn't see a shoreline. The water simply stretched away until it joined the orange haze at the horizon. She would have asked Limpet how far she had to go if she'd been able to find the breath.

Paddle, paddle, lunge, breath. Paddle, paddle, lunge, breath. She settled into a rhythm and kept her mind from the mechanics of her journey.

Suddenly, Limpet veered sharply to the side and headed downstream. She tried to follow his path, but her sudden thrashing forced her head under the murky waters.

His barked warning was lost in the thick soup that filled her ears, eyes and throat. Hacking and spitting, her head broke the surface to see the quick flash of Limpet's IR laser. She tried reaching for her blaster, only to be jolted sideways as something bumped solidly against her legs, slamming her up and out of the algae covered waters.

Tumbling end over end, she met the waters again head first. Nyssa struggled to right herself, scrambling desperately for the surface and air. Another massive impact came, this time to the midsection. Her breath



streamed out in a flurry of bubbles.

Panic and a desperate need for oxygen screamed through her mind and echoed.

Her lungs found air for the second time as the thing pressed her again from beneath. She tried striking down at it, but the thick waters dulled her efforts. A slick tentacle struck her across the cheek as she finally succeeded in freeing her blaster from its holster and fired.

She never saw if the plasma stream connected or not. A firm tug on her leg dragged her once more beneath the roiling surface. She fired again blindly, the creature seemed everywhere and nowhere at once. She was dragged deeper, and the light at the water's surface faded with the depth. As the last of her oxygen escaped her battered chest, her mind clouded...darkness descended.

The unseen creature suddenly loosed its grasp and slid away into the black.

A spark from within stirred her clouded senses. Clawing desperately, Nyssa kicked for the surface. Another impact came from below and she found herself in free-fall.

She slammed back into the water as if hitting a wall of steel. She floundered for a moment before realizing her feet had solid purchase. She was in the shallows again.

Standing up painfully, blaster trained on each new ripple and bubble. She looked to her left. Limpet was closing the distance between them rapidly.

"You made contact with an apparently indigenous life form," Limpet said, floating beside her.

"No shit," she said, turning around warily.

"It appears to have departed. Perhaps it was frightened by my laser," Limpet said. Nyssa didn't comment.

"Are we on the right side of the river?" She asked.

"Judged by facing upstream or downstream?" Limpet asked.

"Are we on the side of the river we were headed for?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's find some dry ground."

"We had best-- you are sinking again." Limpet drifted away. Nyssa cursed (again), pulled her feet free from the muck and followed.

Within an hour Limpet had located a small ridgeline which rose above the water. Nyssa climbed to the top of the nearest surface-break and collapsed in exhaustion. The cool rock and soft moss felt good against her cheek.

After spending several minutes sprawled motionless, she pulled herself to an upright position and looked over the land. The ridgeline consisted of four connected hilltops. The tallest one broke the surface by a full half meter, a veritable mountain.

"Not much of a landmark," she said.

"No, but nonetheless, it narrows down our location considerably. Now that you have found firm purchase, perhaps I should range about and find some other reference points. This would also allow me to gain a wid--."

"Okay, okay. But let me sleep first. I've already seen proof that this planet has some nasty inhabitants. I'll need a lookout."

"Naturally."

Nyssa found the most comfortable rocky outcropping she could, and lay back against it. "How many more hours in the local day?" She asked.

"Forty."

The only exclamation she managed was a short sigh. "Let's hope we reach the outpost before then. That would make one long night in the wilderness." She was asleep before Limpet had a chance to reply.

Nyssa shivered.

She was standing naked in the middle of a cold, barren field. Movement was impossible. All she could do was watch helpless as a shadowy figure approached.

The figure grew in size and shape. It began to take on manlike proportions. Suddenly, Nyssa recognized it as Parker, the man who hired her, but something was different. She looked at him and was overwhelmed by a sense of evil and dread.

Parker reached down and picked her up in his hand. "Well, well. I see you've really *come through* for me," he said, leering. His mouth was a great gaping hole ringed with fetid spears.

She woke screaming, her body was bathed in a cold sweat, her blaster ready and shaking.

In the distance, from somewhere within the enshrouding mists, came a piercing, inhuman echo to her anguish, pounding in her eardrums. She listened breathlessly.

"It began a few minutes ago, about the same time I noted your slumber growing restless," Limpet said, floating up behind Nyssa's rocky perch.

"Is it that thing we encountered?" Nyssa asked, shaking off the chill which still ran through her.

"Unknown. If it is, such a cry would imply an amphibious nature, or at least a past history of air-breathing," Limpet said, "I don't know much xenobiology, but I know I've never heard a loud fish."

The cry ceased abruptly and left only the gentle lapping of the water against the rocks. Nyssa looked at the NA1.

"Humor, Limpet?"

"Not my field. It was just a general observation."

Nyssa drew her knees up and leaned forward, wrapping her arms around them, cold sweat raising

goosebumps on her flesh. There was something haunting in that cry. There was something haunting in her dream; and she had a feeling deep down inside that somehow the two were related. She lay back and returned to sleep which, this time, was uninterrupted by dreams.

Limpet was gone when she woke. The *one* thing she had told him to do was stick around while she slept. Naturally, that was the one thing he *didn't* do. NAI's are useful to have around, but they have their own set of priorities.

Nyssa picked up the cryo-chamber and examined it. The cylinder wasn't showing any obvious signs of damage, which was good. The cryonic indicators indicated that whatever was inside was still being kept nice and frosty. The question was, what *was* inside?

Specimens. That was what Parker had said. That implied some frozen bit of biology. Something important enough to attract the attention of both the Alcon Corporation and the pirates.

She lifted the cylinder to her ear and listened. It hummed reassuringly, as if it were alive. The impression unnerved her. Still, both her reputation and paycheck depended upon her safeguarding it.

She slung it over her shoulder and stood up. A distant wind seemed to be picking up. The surrounding haze remained motionless, but the sound of moving air was unmistakable.

As it grew nearer, she recognized it for what it was: a flyer. She quietly scrambled into the water behind an outcropping and drew her blaster. Until she knew otherwise, anyone in this wilderness had to be regarded as the enemy, probably the ones who had shot her out of orbit.

The flyer drew nearer, but did not pass directly overhead. At its nearest approach, she could just barely make it out in the distance. Still, Nyssa found herself holding her breath until it was swallowed up by the horizon.

Slowly and with caution she stood up and climbed atop the outcropping. Everything seemed as it had before: peaceful. The only sound was the gentle lapping of water against the rock which she stood on. There was no sign that anything was near but she and the silent, dead air.

"Nyssa!" Limpet came rocketing up behind her. She turned with a start and almost lost her balance.

"Dammit, Limpet..." she started to yell. Limpet ignored her, darting about nervously in front of her.

"The pirates are searching for us. You must leave here at once. They will most certainly return very soon. I will try and interfere with their beacon by broadcasting from another location...."

"Hold it!" She said. The NAI unit sputtered for a moment, but became silent. "That flyer was a pirate flyer,

you're sure of that?"

"Yes, I picked up their communications with the outpost. That is where they have landed."

"Cozy. Now what is this about a beacon?"

"I detected it when I was out surveying. It was apparently triggered by a start-up code the pirates broadcast. They can't get a good fix on it because of the magnetic interference, much like my problem finding the outpost, but they will narrow our location down fairly soon." Limpet swooped down towards the water. "Come. I will show you the way."

"Limpet, get back here," Nyssa said. The NAI popped back up in front of her.

"What?" he asked.

"Where is this beacon you are babbling about?"

"On the cryonics chamber, obviously. The Alcon Corporation apparently didn't want their package lost, so they built in a homing beacon. And right now it is broadcasting our location to the pirates...will you come, please?" he said, zooming off again. Nyssa followed him.

"Can we disable the beacon?" She yelled after him.

He stopped and turned. "I can't. If you can, now would be a good time to do it." He paused and regarded her passively. She had no response. "I didn't think so. Let's go."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to outrun their flyer, Limpet."

"No. I am going to bring you to a raised ridgeline which will take you within sight of the tower. While you are following it, I will head on a different vector broadcasting an identical, but stronger version, of the homing beacon's signal. With luck, this will pull the pirates far enough away that your signal will become lost in the surrounding interference. When I deem that this has happened, I will rejoin you."

"You expect me to make my way through this stuff alone?" she asked.

"Or we can try to outrun the flyer. Have I overlooked another alternative?"

Nyssa stopped and looked down at the package. "I could destroy this thing. Then they wouldn't have a chance of finding us."

"Yes. You could do that." Limpet hovered idly. "Is this your decision?"

She shook her head slowly. "No."

"I didn't think you would, that is why I discounted it as an option. We both take our jobs more seriously than that."

She smiled grimly. "Damn it! If I'm going to go through all of this *crud*, I want to make damn well sure that I get paid."

Nyssa stood on the ridge and watched Limpet disappear on his mission of deception. Limpet's 'ridgeline'



turned out to be mostly underwater, just like everything else on this stupid planet. Limpet had assured her that there were mountains to the west and extensive polar regions, but she wasn't sure she believed him...to her, this entire planet was one ridiculous, waist-deep swamp.

Well, not really waist-deep. She had discovered very early that this ridge was bordered by some abrupt chasms. Every now and again she would slip, tumbling into water which was decidedly deeper.

At least the ridge was solid; she could stop without sinking. There was also now at least one dry feature within sight at all times. However, the loneliness was palpable. Even just having a machine floating nearby had been somehow reassuring. She swatted at a bloodsucker that biting into her neck. Useful, too.

The question remained, what was she going to do once she got to the outpost, now that she knew the pirates were there? That part of the plan had never been very well defined to begin with. While it was her only hope, it was also enemy territory.

Then she saw it. A ripple here, a slight splash there, something was moving underneath the water to her left. It must have been large, considering its wake...perhaps a cousin of the thing which had attacked her in the river.

She fought down the urge to shoot into the water. That would be pointless. Best to wait until she had a chance to make her shot count...and then make sure that it *did* count.

She slid back into the water. If she stayed up on the rock much longer, she wouldn't be able to convince herself to leave it. She moved forward. As long as she stayed on the ridge, there shouldn't be too much trouble. Whatever *it* was, it would have to stay in deep water; the shallows would force it up where she could see it.

Of course, Limpet had been nice enough to point out the evidence of air-breathers which might live in this soup.

For a time the creature seemed to pace her. Stalking? Predators often followed their prey for hours waiting for an opening. What was it doing out there? Working up an appetite?

Years ago, while serving with a marine unit on one of the Rimworlds, she'd watched a small flock of transplanted Terran ducks simply disappear one day. They'd landed on a calm lake near the base. Everything was still. Then, all at once, the water around them boiled up and the fowl were pulled beneath the water. Within several seconds, all that remained was blood and feathers. No one had felt like finding out *what* it was that ate them.

She watched the gentle ripples lap the ridge for a moment. They seemed so calm and innocent, she had to remind herself what they signified.

Maybe this was just a swamp monster that

happened to be going her way? *Fat chance, sailor.*

She was heading into deeper water, traversing an underwater saddle between two outcroppings, when she noticed the ripples were coming at her. Fast. She tried to scramble back up the slope, but there wasn't time. Her blaster was up and ready as the creature broke the surface.

Its gaping maw rose above her. She fired as a tentacle struck her in the ribs. The shot went wide. Another blow came on her back before she had recovered from the first.

Adrenaline kept her moving. The force of the blows had thrown her to higher ground where she could maneuver better. She dodged another probing tentacle and drew a bead on what she assumed to be the eyes.

She wanted to fire, but was surprised to find she couldn't will herself to pull the trigger. Her mind was flooded with images, their weight staggering. Thoughts which weren't her own danced through her brain.

She suddenly wondered if the creature was a telepath.

Yet, it also seemed to be suffering in much the same way as she.

Finally she cried out in despair, a shriek which ripped from her soul, the pain of the unfamiliar too great. The creature bellowed its pain in echo, slipping into the depths.

Horrid images retreated to the edge of her consciousness. Nyssa retreated to the outcropping and clawed her way onto it. Her ribs ached and her entire body shook; the rush of adrenaline, coupled with an empty stomach, caused the bile to rise in her throat. She convulsed in dry heaves.

She had never met a telepath. Psionics were still only dimly understood, but she had heard enough to recognize the effects. But the effects she had heard of had never been this strong...*broadcast telepathy?*

*Something* had been playing with her mind since she got on this planet, and she suspected she knew what. The cryo-chamber was still humming softly against her hip. She checked the indicators, the specimen was still frozen. Could a telepath be active even while frozen?

Apparently.

For a moment she wanted to throw it out into the murky water, to be rid of the intruder in her mind. It had been controlling her dreams and probably, subtly, her actions ever since she had come into close contact with it.

With one toss she would be free.

Would it try to stop her? She closed her eyes and searched her mind. She could feel the light touch of something *else* at its edge, now that she knew it was there. Still, it was a light touch. There was none of the coercive force which had been there in the dreams or during the fight with the monster.

The decision, apparently, had been left up to her.

How much it understood of her thoughts, she had no way of knowing...but there was *some* kind of understanding there. She could sense it; it was sentient, however dimly.

Well. Now what? Carrying the telepath at all was a danger because of the pirates-- but that came with the job. Knowing what the package contained didn't increase her danger. It did, however, make her uneasy. She reached down and touched the cylinder; it still hummed gently.

Limpet had summed it up best: she took her job seriously. Whether she felt comfortable with it or not. If she abandoned the cryo-chamber, she would be unemployed.

What was Parker's game? Her contract was still with *him*...but it hadn't involved a sentient before. She certainly no longer believed that the 'pirates' were independent operators.

She really needed to find another line of work.

By the time Limpet returned, Nyssa had been watching the outpost for almost an hour. The ridge had finally risen above the level of the water enough so that it actually looked like a ridge. It gave them a pretty good view of the situation.

The outpost itself had been built upon an outcropping which had been artificially leveled. The pirates' pinnace sat on a pad next to a *plascrete* bunker. The mile-high tower, which enabled transmissions to escape through the magnetic storms into space, rose out of the water next to it. Considering the high gravity on this world, it appeared impossibly slender.

An engineer probably would have delighted in explaining how this needle was kept stuck upright. Nyssa and Limpet were busy counting.

"There were three on the flyer," Limpet said, "And we have seen another three individuals moving about the bunkhouse below."

"Which leaves one unaccounted for. Those pinnaces are rated for seven people," she said.

"Perhaps they were short handed."

"Not likely. The ship that shot us down could hold up to twenty people. In my experience, pirates usually don't have staffing problems. The pay is too good."

"So where is the other one?" Limpet asked.

Nyssa looked around the broken ground. "Somewhere up here, I imagine. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out we would be heading here. They probably put someone up here to keep watch."

"Then why haven't we been spotted?" Limpet asked.

"Because these are pirates. Ten to one the idiot went to sleep as soon as he was out of sight. We just have to be careful we don't trip over him accidentally." She smiled and drew her blaster.

"Then why don't we move in?" Limpet asked.

"Let's not get over-confident, shall we?" Nyssa responded.

After about forty-five minutes of careful picking along, Limpet slid up next to her shoulder. "I have spotted the lookout. He has a nest set up behind the two boulders 58 degrees to your right front. We are approaching on his blind side," Limpet said.

"How is he armed?"

"He appears to have a slug-throwing rifle of some kind."

"No problem. Try circling around to cut off any escape," Nyssa said.

"You don't want me to cover you?" Limpet asked.

"From what? I don't want the lookout bolting and getting a chance to warn his pals. I'll be fine," she said.

"Fine," Limpet said. The NAI silently floated away. Nyssa remained hidden among the rocks to give him time to get into position. He was a NAV unit, she reminded herself. Get him involved with combat and his logic got a bit flaky.

Keeping her blaster at the ready, she approached the boulders. The lookout wasn't trying very hard to keep quiet. She could hear him fidgeting from where she was. It was child's play to get in position and draw her bead.

At the last moment he seemed to sense her presence. He turned to face her just as she fired. Despite the fact that she had only used a low-energy pulse, it made a ruined mess of his face and skull.

Damn, he should have stayed still and taken the shot in the helmet. He would have lived. Ah hell, scratch one lookout.

She was still feeling regrets when the stun pulse came from behind.

She was lying on concrete, she could tell that. It took a moment for her eyes to agree to open so she could see where she was. The slender form of the tower and the edge of the bunker were all she could make out. Apparently they had put her on the landing pad.

She tried to move. Her limbs were tied quite securely.

"Don't get any ideas," a deep voice said from her side. She strained her neck to see the speaker. He stepped into her field of view. He was a large man, well suited to the profession of piracy. His right cheek was badly scarred. "I should probably kill you," he said, "you took out one of my best men."

"If that was your best, you have my sympathies," Nyssa said, trying to move into a more comfortable position.

The man laughed. "I wouldn't be so quick to criticize," he pulled out a large knife and stepped forward, "You *did* just blunder into a trap." He leaned over her.



She felt the bonds on her legs fall away. Her arms were still securely fastened, but she could sit up now. "I never claimed to be perfect. May I inquire as to your identity?"

"Halder. This is my unit. Don't worry, I'm not a vengeful man. Deaths happen in our line of work. You lost, I won, so I am happy. You'll be released on bond when we get off-planet...", he said, "unless you are planning to hold a grudge."

"Grudges interfere with business," Nyssa said. She still felt a bit woozy. The effects of a nerve pulse took a while to wear off. "Where is the 'bot'?"

"Escaped. Sorry, but I can't allow you to retrieve it. I'm not vengeful, but I'm also not stupid. Even a utility 'bot can be dangerous."

Nyssa's head was slowly clearing. Halder had the cryo-chamber, she could see this now. So she *had* lost; her contract was lost.

"Tell me," Nyssa asked, "do you work for Alcon?"

Halder's eyebrows shot up. "Yes. You figured that out?"

"It makes sense. So Parker was stealing the specimen?"

"Well, actually this is more like an inter-departmental dispute. It belongs to Alcon Corp., that was never in dispute. The only question was, who got credit." He gave the cryo-chamber a little pat. "Apparently, we do. Once this implant hits the market...I expect to retire on my cut."

"Implant?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a symbiote. It works telepathically with the host...I am sure I don't have to outline its usefulness for you." He started to walk away. "Next time you should make sure you work for the winning side. It has its advantages," he added.

Nyssa lay her head back down on the concrete. They were going to market the telepath as a bioimplant...a *sentient*!

Suddenly it hit her; the telepath she carried was *not* inactive, merely "slowed" by the cold of the cryo-chamber. Somehow, it influenced both her dreams of impending danger and her nagging doubts about Parker. It *knew* it was in danger. If she was effected, why not other sentients? She hadn't been being stalked by a swamp-monster after all! Her *package* was drawing the attention of *all* sentients in its sphere of influence. *Whatever* the tentacled beast was, it was tracking her charge, not her. Perhaps they were kindred beings...?

No matter. All she had to do was sit quietly and let the pirates take her off-planet. They would probably require a bonded ransom to let her go, but it wouldn't take long to pay it off. All she had to do was sit back and let it happen.

Or, she could come up with some *brilliant* plan, overpower the pirates, steal back the package, get

off-planet, and deliver the package to Parker...so he could do the exact same thing with it. Aside from being an unlikely turn of events, she also couldn't get enthusiastic about it. She was getting sick and tired of working for assholes.

The telepath *shouldn't* be delivered to either of them, damn it! She hadn't been carrying a 'package'; she'd been carrying a conscious life form. They had made her a fucking slaver...the lowest scum in the galaxy.

She knew what she had to try. It was stupid, it wasn't going to work, but...some things she didn't offer up for contract. She *wasn't* a slaver, no matter what *anyone* paid her.

Nyssa looked around. Two of the pirates were loading the flyer into the pinnace. Soon they would be leaving. Anything she was going to do, she had to do soon. She looked behind her.

Just how reliable was that NAI, she wondered? Only one way to find out.

Halder had left a guard on her. He stood just a few meters away and had an energy rifle slung casually. With difficulty she got to her feet. The guard laid a warning hand on the rifle.

"Don't worry. I'm just straightening out my legs," she said.

"If you don't stay over there and behave, you're the one who'll have something to worry about," the guard said.

Nyssa smiled.

"What do expect me to do, come over there and kick you to death?" she asked. The guard didn't respond. "Now would be a good time," she added.

The guard looked at her for a second, then got an annoyed look on his face. "What?"

"I said that *now* would be a good time."

"And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Actually, I wasn't talking to you."

The guard looked like he was getting pissed now. "I'm in no mood for games, lady...."

"Limpet! *Now would be a good time*," she said impatiently. The guard started to say something else, but was cut off. Limpet rose silently from the brackish water and wrapped his tentacles around the man's head.

There was commotion over by the bunker, as the other pirates saw what was happening. Nyssa put her head down and charged towards the guard Limpet had entangled. His IR laser was cutting a brutal gash across his chest. Nyssa collided with them, knocking them to the ground.

"Cut me loose!" She yelled.

The other pirates were running towards them. She saw Halder emerge from the bunker, his face set in rage.

"One moment," Limpet said. He finished his

incision on the guard and moved behind her quickly. Soon she was free. Scrambling, she picked up the guard's rifle and began firing towards the remaining pirates. They all hit the deck.

"I want her dead!" she heard Halder bellow.

"What now, boss?" Limpet said, floating low against the concrete.

"Hit the cryo-chamber, I'll cover you!" she said, keeping up a steady barrage of fire towards the bunker while scrabbling over the edge of the landing pad for cover. A few of the pirates returned her fire.

"The cryo-chamber? Wouldn't that be counter to our initial contract, which stated, if I may quote: 'to be deliver--'," Limpet started to say. Nyssa fired at two of the pirates who were scrambling for the pinnace. If they got to the ship's guns, she was dead.

"No, you may not quote! Hit it with a low energy pulse. Just enough to disable the cryonics. Do it!" She yelled.

Limpet seemed to pause for a moment in indecision. Finally, he just said, "fine, suit yourself," and zoomed off.

With any luck, once the telepath was fully active, it would see the danger it faced and be able to defend itself. If not, well...one of the pirates ducked in the hatch of the pinnace...things looked real bad.

Limpet dodged a gauntlet of fire. Nyssa concentrated on making the pirates keep their heads down. Limpet was quite nimble in the air. He dropped down low and she lost sight of him.

She fired wildly, trying to raise herself up to see where he was. One of the pirate's bolts hit the concrete just in front of her, she quickly ducked back down.

That was when they heard the inhuman scream. It echoed through the air, in their minds, into their souls. Everyone froze in place, gazing in fear at the misty landscape around them. Silence fell like a shroud.

Nyssa put her hands over her ears. She recognized the roar as being that of one of the nameless horrors of the swamp.

Silence. Nobody moved. Anticipation. Halder inched forward. His hand was badly burned. He looked down at the cryo-chamber: the electronics were fried. *Damn the bitch to hell.* He looked around to goad his men into action. Then he saw it.

Surging up from the water, the hellish creature came, all sea spray and fury. The men tried to react, but were overcome with the image of their own deaths. The very air seemed to echo with the sound of imminent destruction.

The creature swept over the outpost, crushing and maiming those who stood before it. Halder struggled to his feet and managed to get off a few feeble shots. He caught a quick image of improbably many teeth before

they closed over him.

Like an enraged bull, the creature charged back and forth, its tentacles battering the pinnace until it finally fell over and sank into the water; a ruined hulk.

Nyssa rolled down the embankment away from the pad, her eyes shut against the psychic assault. "Enough!" She cried, "Enough!" She felt Halder's death as if it were her own. Thoughts and fears tore at her from every quarter, from every mind. The images of death and fury continued, but slowly began to abate.

The creature slipped back into the water. For a moment, nothing moved. Nyssa found herself holding her breath. Then it rose from the depths right in front of her. She held the blaster out before her in feeble defense.

It regarded her with inhuman eyes. The fury passed away. They regarded each other for a tense moment, then it turned away and sank beneath the ripples. She was not enemy, therefore, it felt indifferent. Now was not the time for food.

Nyssa dropped the blaster to her side and tried to regain her ragged breath. She tried to purge the images of death from her mind-- to little avail.

"Good plan," Limpet said, floating up next to her.

She looked up at the NAI wearily. "That wasn't the way it was supposed to work," she whispered.

"You are alive. You had planned otherwise?" Limpet asked.

"No...I don't really know what I expected. I don't really know what that was," she said weakly.

"It must be unpleasant to be a sentient nearby when a telepath dies," Limpet said.

Nyssa sat up. "What? Dead? How?"

"The heat, I suspect. It's life signs ceased very soon after I disabled the cryonics. It wasn't being suspended, merely sustained."

She dropped back down and shook her head. "I was trying to help it."

"I told you it was counter to our contract."

"Limpet."

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

The remaining pirates in orbit sent down another pinnace, looked through the wreckage and left. Apparently recovering the dead creature satisfied them. Nyssa and Limpet had kept hidden in the swamp.

Parker arrived about a week later. Nyssa stood alone on the pad while his craft grounded. He came sauntering down the ramp looking as if he'd just left a fashionable restaurant. He was sucking on a nicstic.

"Well girl, sorry things turned out so shabbily for you. Really I am," he said, "I'm sure we could work out *something* to get you a *partial* payment."

"Shove it up your ass," she replied.



"Is that any way to address your savior and rescuer?" He said, in a mockingly hurt tone.

"When I radioed for help, I would have preferred they sent *anyone* but you. You set me up." She pushed past him and headed for the ship. He turned and followed her.

"Am I *that* transparent?" he chuckled.

"Halder's people had spies good enough to know my rendezvous point, the security codes for the mission, all about the cryo-chamber's beacon...."

"I know, isn't it dreadful? You can't trust *anyone* these days," Parker said.

"But they had the most basic detail wrong," Nyssa said, taking one last look at the bleak orange landscape. She wasn't sorry to be leaving, that much was true.

"Oh?"

"I'm told this symbiote is from an ice world. It couldn't be implanted into a mammal, the temperature would kill it. Halder's people didn't know that...a minor kink in their plans."

"You noticed that, eh?"

"It is commercially useless...."

"True, unless you happen to be an ammonia

whale, this symbiote isn't more than a scientific novelty. My department figured that out ages ago. However, as a red herring it has proven invaluable."

"A red herring."

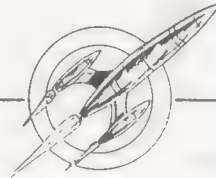
"Little episodes like this help keep our distinguished competition's attention from the *real* game." Limpet glided inside the pinnace; Nyssa began closing the hatch. It sealed with a dull thud.

She turned and headed to one of the lift couches. She stopped, and after a moment, turned back to face Parker.

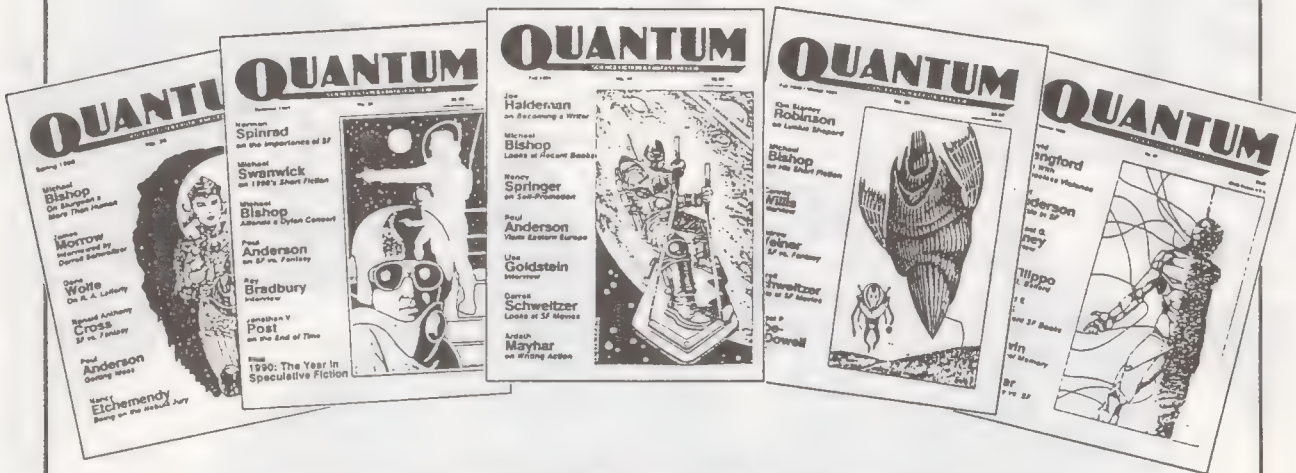
"Is that all this is to you? A game?"

He laughed. "Sure. What else should it be?"

Nyssa sat down on the couch and began strapping herself in. Limpet secured himself to the hull nearby. "A job," she said, "that's all it is, just a job."



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# The Barefoot Mule

By  
Frank O. Dodge

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The mule was just standing out there all by itself in the middle of the desert. There was nothing for a hundred miles in any direction except a couple of saguaro cactuses standing with their arms up like surrendering soldiers and half a dozen prairie dog holes. Yet there it stood, with the braided reins from its halter draggin' the ground, moving it's jaw occasionally, and staring off into the distance.

I adjusted my binoculars and swept the terrain from horizon to horizon. Nothing but sand and prickly pear. Flat. Desolate. Empty. Except for the mule. I zeroed back on him. He moved; turning to his right, he ambled slowly into a hole in the air.

My jaw dropped and my mind went into neutral. As I watched, the mule's nose, then his muzzle, ears, neck and forequarters disappeared as though the animal were walking behind a big boulder, only there was nothing there. A moment later I was staring at a desert without a mule.

I lowered the binoculars to the seat beside me and rubbed my eyes. What I had seen had not happened. It *couldn't* have happened. A mirage! It had to be a mirage.

Well, maybe so, but I had to check it out. I *had* to. I started the jeep and drove down to where the damn mule had been. I cut the motor and stood up on the seat to scan the area. A mirage does not leave footprints. This one had.

This didn't add to my peace of mind.

The hoofprints of an unshod mule started in the middle of a stretch of otherwise unmarked sand, made a semicircle back to the center of that otherwise unmarked stretch of sand, and disappeared. Just disappeared. The tracks just started, and then just disappeared.

This added even less to my peace of mind. I should have never taken this case in the first place.

To begin with, the money was infinitesimal. That should have warned me off, but the girl had been very

persuasive. The only available information about the case came from an old desert rat who looked like Gabby Hayes on a bad day.

Now *that* should have warned me off. But the girl had been *very* persuasive...pretty too. The information provided was completely screwy and made no sense whatsoever *and* involved a mule.

Now that *really* should have warned me off.

She'd come into my Los Angeles office and asked me to find her father. "Okay. Name?" I asked.

"Phil Franklin," she responded.

"Age?"

"Fifty-one."

"Description?"

"Tall and thin, but strong and wiry. Hair: grey. Eyes: blue. One hundred and ninety-five pounds. Complexion: ruddy."

I dutifully made my notes. "Occupation?" I asked.

"Prospector."

"Prospector? As in 'somebody who looks for gold', prospector?"

"Yes."

"And where does he look for this gold?"

"Death Valley."

*Great.*

Now you'd think even a jerk like me would have said at this point, "Look lady, I'm a city boy; what do I know from deserts? What you need is a Texas Ranger type." But did I say that? *Did I?*

No, I didn't. Have I mentioned she was pretty?

I brought up my fee plus expenses. That's where we hit our second snag. She didn't have that kind of money. Not that I get all that much, but she could offer only about a third of what I usually get.

This is where I should have recommended Cheap Charlie, the keyhole-peeper down the hall, but...I do believe I mentioned that she was kind of cute. The sort of tiny little thing the word *petite* was coined for. Her short brown hair was sort of feathery around the face. She had

a turned-up nose, freckles even. Ah hell, the whole works.

She seemed helpless, but brave. Her hands trembled a little. There was a little worry wrinkle between her eyes and she had an air of 'it's such a big world and I'm so small' about her. But the chin...the soft, round chin...thrust courageously. And I'm sure, had I checked, her upper lip would have been stiff....

I told her I'd see what I could do.

I asked the usual. Were there any clues to Daddy's whereabouts? How long had he been among the missing? Where was he last seen? Did *anyone* know *anything*?

Her answers:

Clues: Sort of.

How long: A little under a month.

Where: Death Valley.

Anyone know anything?: Sort of.

"Who?" I asked.

"Angus MacDermott," was her reply.

*What's an Angus MacDermott?*

An Angus Macdermott, it turned out, was an old prospector buddy of Daddy's. And where was this alleged MacDermott to be found?

"The Castle."

"The *Castle*?"

"Yes."

Back in the twenties or early thirties there had been an old goldseeker called 'Death Valley Scotty'. The old geezer had an annoying habit of disappearing into that blinding inferno for days at a stretch and coming out with a donkey-load of gold. Over a period of years he built a rambling structure vaguely reminiscent of a medieval castle out in the Valley.

The old boy was quite noted. He was in the papers from time to time. Lots of people tried to follow the wily old desert rat to discover the source of this wealth, but he had a way of disappearing among the sand dunes and cacti. No one ever found his digging, and more than a few never came back out of the desert. Scotty died in the late thirties or early forties and his 'Castle' fell into ruins.

Angus MacDermott and Diana Franklin's father had set up housekeeping in a corner of the ruins. All right, it wasn't a corner, it was a thick-walled adobe outbuilding that somehow managed to stay cool inside despite the hundred degrees plus that kept the lizards hopping from one foot to another on the sand outside.

The old Scot was seventy-five, and fifty-odd years of tramping around Death Valley dragging a reluctant burro had sun-dried him into a tall, skinny six feet of very tough saddle leather. He wore Levis, boots, and an old sombrero about the size of a beach umbrella.

The two men had put together pretty comfortable digs for themselves. Colorful serapes thrown across the

beds and hung from the walls gave the place a cheerful air. An old shotgun was cradled in a bracket over the door and another stood against the wall next to one of the beds. A worn six-gun in a scarred holster hung from a peg. All three weapons were well cared for. There was a table, some chairs, and a wood cookstove. There was also a refrigerator, a TV, electric lights, and a two-way radio, all powered by a gasoline generator out back.

Diana Franklin and I had driven out from L.A. in old Angus' landrover jeep. She'd notified the old man via radio that we were coming, and MacDermott had beans and tortillas waiting. They were good. I was sopping out my third bowl while he cut me in on the scoop.

The day Phil Franklin vanished, he'd gone alone to check out a likely-looking ridge while MacDermott remained behind to catch up on the chores. He'd gone on foot because it was only a half day's hike, and they were short on gas. They wanted to save what they had for the generator. Franklin should have been back no later than noon of the following day...but he never showed. Old Angus went looking for him.

MacDermott had no difficulty following his partner's trail. Then he arrived at a place where Franklin's tracks were obliterated by the marks of unshod hooves, and that was that. The old Scot circled, Indian fashion, to pick up the trail of man or mule, and that's where it got spooky. There wasn't any. No hoofprints coming, no hoofprints going. No bootmarks in the sand. Nothing but Franklin's trail ending literally in the middle of nowhere, along with hoofprints that came from nowhere and returned to nowhere.

And that's what the old man told the State Police.

I could imagine how *this* was received by the authorities: "Yeah, Pop, sure, we'll look into it." Two days later a state cruiser showed up to 'investigate'. Old prospectors were always wandering off into the desert and getting lost. No one at Patrol HQ got into much of a sweat over it any more. The damned fools ought to know better.

Comfortable in their air conditioned patrol car, the cops followed Angus's jeep to where the trail ended. All the marks were still there, but the city-bred policemen couldn't read them. MacDermott tried to explain. He tried to make them understand that Franklin had not left this spot...there was no exit trail...there was no....

The cops were hot and bored and this old geezer had had his brains fried out by the sun a couple of hundred years ago. "Sure, Pop, sure. Look, he'll probably turn up in a few days. He's probably out there digging up a whole mountain of gold and you'll both be rich. Look, Pop, we've got to get back to town. He isn't dead...there's no body. He'll turn up."

And that was the 'investigation'.

Fortunately, old Angus made no reference to a disappearing mule, or the investigation would have ended up with the old man doing basket weaving in the state



hospital.

He left out the mule because, at that point, he hadn't seen it. The mule came later. Angus went back to try again. That's when he spotted the it...and saw it disappear.

We put supplies for a couple of days in the jeep, and I went with an old man into the desert to look for a disappearing mule. Diana wanted to go with us, but Angus deemed it too dangerous, and she agreed to stay behind and keep in touch by radio.

You're probably wondering why Diana Franklin went all the way to Los Angeles to drag another city slicker out to Mother Nature's oven after the brush-off they'd gotten from the 1st batch. And why me in particular?

Well, it seems that I had been lucky enough to get my name in the papers a time or two in connection with several tricky cases involving some persons who had managed to get themselves *thoroughly* lost. One of those cases had had a bizarre twist I *still* haven't figured out, but since I found the guy, I don't bring that up in general conversation.

At any rate, here I was out in the middle of Death Valley, sweating like your kid sister's new boyfriend while you told him what you did to guys who got friendly with the hands. I was asking myself why I had allowed myself to get talked into doing something as stupid as standing on the seat of a jeep staring at a bunch of hoofprints in the sand. *Have I mentioned she was pretty?*

I got out of the jeep and studied the mule tracks from up close. They started nowhere and went back to the same place. I walked around them, leaving a few tracks of my own, but even from close up, they still didn't tell me anything. All they said was that a mule had been here, and now he wasn't. Hell, I had seen *that* for myself. I went back to the jeep.

The bearded, sun-dried old coot in the back seat spoke his first word in two hours. "What'd I tell you?"

"Okay, so you told me. I still don't believe it."

MacDermott chuckled. He squinted at the sky. "She'll be down in less than an hour. Gets cooler after dark. Gets cold, ac'tally. You'll be glad you brought that coat that I seen you laffin' at me behind my back fer tellin' you t' bring."

I was still staring at those damned hoofprints. Angus chuckled again. "Don't let it throw yuh, sonny. Done th' same thing t' me, first time I seen him. *Still* ain't got used t' it."

I helped the old man get the gear from the jeep and set up the tent and propane cookstove. The old timer was getting stuff from the ice chest to fix for supper when the radio crackled. "Johnny?"

I picked up the mike and thumbed the switch. "That's me."

"Anything happen?"

"Unfortunately for my peace of mind, yes."

"Just like Angus said?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It just disappeared?"

"Just walked into...the air."

"Do you think my father..."

"Boss, I don't know *what* to think." I heard MacDermott chuckling behind me. "So far all I've done is provide amusement for a certain old desert rat."

Diana laughed. "He's entitled. He's been laughed at every time he tried to get someone to listen."

"Yeah, well *I'm* not laughing anymore. You have no idea what it does to you to watch a fifteen hundred pound mule disappear like a Cheshire Cat...and he didn't leave even a grin behind."

"Johnny?"

"Yeah, boss?"

"Find my father for me?"

I looked at those damned mule tracks. "I'll do the best I can."

"I know you will, Johnny. Keep me posted?"

"Right boss, *ciao*."

"*Ciao*."

I hung the mike on its bracket and went back to MacDermott. The old man looked at me, his leathery face unsmiling. "That's a mighty sweet girl there and I've known her all her life. I wouldn't take to it kindly if she got hurt." Still studying my face, he drew a long knife from his boot and used it to turn the steaks on the grill.

I squatted beside the fire and looked at him. "I've got a kid sister. I know what you're saying."

Angus grunted and turned the steaks with the tip of his toad sticker.

The sun went down and the furnace-like air cooled rapidly. I was grateful for the jacket old Angus insisted I bring. The moon rose. I couldn't believe how much brighter it was out here away from the smog. Angus scrubbed out our plates with sand and leaned back against the jeep. He brought out an old pipe and sat puffing. I lit up a cigarette.

"Think he'll come back?"

"Dunno."

We sat and waited.

The wait was in vain. The mule did not show again. Around noon the next day we returned to the Castle and Diana. "Don't look so worried, honey," Angus said, "we'll find old Phil."

Diana, it turned out, was a good cook. MacDermott leaned back and lit his pipe. "Somethin' just occurred to me. There's an old Indian, lives a few miles from here. He's about old enough t' be a personal friend of th' Great Spirit hisself...mebby he's heard about this appearin'-disappearin' mule before. Wanna go talk t' him?"

I lit a cigarette. "Couldn't hurt."

Buffalo Man looked about like MacDermott had described him. He sat, wrapped in a blanket despite the heat, and spoke out of the mass of wrinkles that served him for a face. The old man spoke in Comanche and Angus interpreted.

The old Indian filled and lighted a pipe with MacDermott's tobacco and looked at us for a long time. A mule...no. He knew nothing of a mule, but there was a very old tale of the Thunderbird's Egg.

"The Thunderbird's Egg?" I asked skeptically.

Old Buffalo Man chuckled wheezily. The Thunderbird was a bird no larger than a man's thumb, but laid an egg so huge that its cracking was the sound of thunder.

*So what's this got to do with why Punk Rockers should be permitted to live?*

Well, according to tribal legend: many, many generations past, a Thunderbird's egg floated down from the sky and landed in the desert. The vast white egg hatched men, strange men with spindly bodies and large heads with big eyes that had no pupils.

The Children of the Egg built two tall towers, atop each of which was a great round plate aimed at the sky. Massive bolts of lightning came from the sky into the plates, causing the air between them to shimmer and pulse. The Egg rose from the ground and moved forward, disappearing into the shimmering air. The People watched from the surrounding dunes in great fear. Generations passed and the towers crumbled and vanished.

"That's it? A space ship landed and disappeared into a warp of some kind?" I asked.

MacDermott translated.

Old Buffalo Man puffed at his pipe. No, that wasn't all. In the time of Buffalo Man's great, great, many times great, grandfather, men like evil spirits would appear from time to time out of the desert and ravage the villages, taking captives, and vanishing back into the desert. Many war parties tracked them, only to have the trail end...just end.

But there was no barefoot mule involved.

We returned to Diana at the Castle. "Okay, so there's a space-warp out there and that's where your father went. What's on the other side and what the damned mule has to do with it, don't ask me."

Diana's chin trembled and I thought she was going to cry, but she took a deep breath and squared her small shoulders. "You'll find him, won't you?"

Old Angus put an arm around her. "We'll find him." He looked at me. "Won't we, sonny?"

Diana's soft eyes searched my face. My heart suddenly raced at what I saw there. "Damn right. Load up the jeep with enough to last for a week."

It wasn't easy to talk Diana out of going with us, but in the end she agreed to stay behind again.

For two days we sat and baked in the sun and nothing happened. Then, on the evening of the second day, we'd finished supper and old Angus was filling his pipe when the air shimmered and the mule's head appeared. Just the head. Hanging there in the bright moonlight, jaw moving idly. Then he walked into full view. I got up slowly so as not to spook him and advanced murmuring soothing sounds. The mule looked at me and snorted, but didn't back away. I took a grip on the dangling reins and stroked his muzzle. He whickered softly.

MacDermott came up and patted the animal's shoulder. "Okay, we got him. What now, sonny?"

I looked at the old Scot.

MacDermott's eyes widened and he shook his head. "You ain't thinkin' what I think you're thinkin'...are yuh?"

"You know any other way?"

Angus shrugged. "Guess not."

I grasped the mule's mane and swung aboard. I looked down at the old man. There wasn't really anything to say, so I tugged on the mule's reins and turned him back toward where he'd come from. I heeled him gently and he moved forward.

I don't know what I expected, but all that happened was that the mule walked. Disappointed, I turned and looked back...and nearly fell off! Angus, the jeep, the tent...all were gone!

I yanked back on the reins. The patient mule turned and plodded back the other way. Suddenly they were there. No 'pop', no tremor, no fireworks; they were just there. MacDermott took off his oversized sombrero and wiped his forehead. "Where'd yuh go?"

"Nowhere. That is, no place. That is, we just walked over there and back..."

"But?"

"But it wasn't here. I mean, what the hell *do* I mean? I looked back and you were gone, so I must have gone *somewhere*...or was it *some-when*?"

"What th' hell d' you mean, *some-when*?"

I slid down from the mule and tethered him to a tall saguaro cactus. Angus picked up the coffee pot and poured two cups. He handed me one. I passed the hot tin cup from hand to hand. "You're going to think I'm crazy."

"Yuh just rode a mule into a hole in the air right in front of my eyes and *that* ain't crazy? What're yuh tryin' t' say?"

I took a sip of the hot bitter coffee and fumbled for my cigarettes. "Angus, I think it's a different time. Same place. Different time."

"Same place. Different time," he repeated.

"Yes."



"All right, why not? And th' mule. He can go from here to there...."

"That's what I think. Only not from 'here' to 'there', but from 'now' to 'then'."

"Okay then, that's where Phil went. Let's go find him."

I took a final drag on my cigarette and flipped it away. "Right. Mount up."

As soon as the camp vanished, Angus cast about for landmarks. "T'won't do us much good t' find old Phil if we can't find our way back."

He lined up two boulders with a giant saguaro and lit down from the mule. He walked back to where the animal's tracks abruptly ceased and built a small cairn of rocks on either side of the trail. "Now," he grunted, "even if the wind blows the tracks away, we just aim th' critter between them piles and that's it." The old man pivoted slowly, noting landmarks on the horizon. I did the same, but the land didn't talk to me the way it did to him. He grunted. The old prospector would be able to pinpoint the 'exit gate' (?) no matter which direction we returned from. He remounted behind me and we moved off, backtracking the mule's trail.

It was about half an hour later that we spotted the glow of a campfire behind a slight rise ahead. I kicked the mule into a shambling trot, but MacDermott tapped me on the shoulder. "Whoa up, sonny. We don't know whether we went back'ards or for'ards in time, do we?"

I reined in. "No."

"Makes a difference. From th' way this critter's halter's braided, I'd say we went back a couple hundred year or more. That means Injuns." He checked his double-barreled shotgun. "Injuns was pretty unfriendly hereabouts that fur back."

I was beginning to wish I'd brought along the other shotgun, the one Phil Franklin left behind in the shack.

The old Scot slid to the ground. "Best hitch th' critter and go for'ard afoot 'til we see what's what."

I dismounted and did as he said. I took the .38 snubnose from under my arm and checked the loads. I snapped the cylinder shut. "Lead on, MacDuff, you're the Injun expert."

Angus grinned. "Come on sonny, and keep it quiet. Be on th' lookout fer sentries."

We crept from shadow to shadow in the bright moonlight until we reached the ridge behind which the fire glowed. At a hand signal from MacDermott, I dropped to my belly and we inched forward and peered over the crest.

What I saw told me we'd gone back more than a couple of hundred years. It was more like *four* hundred. The dozen men sitting and lying around the campfire wore doublets of scarlet and/or yellow wool or velvet, and tight trunk-hose-like leotards. Coal-scuttle shaped helmets

called *morions* and steel breastplates glinted in the firelight. All were armed with long swords and several had clumsy wheel-lock *musketoons*. I counted five long, heavy firelock muskets, with their Y-shaped firing supports.

*Conquistadores!*

No one had ever determined for sure just how far the Spanish explorer Francisco Vasques de Coronado had penetrated into the continent looking for the 'Seven Cities of Cibola' the Indians had told of, but it was a good bet that I was looking at some of his men, if not the Hidaigo himself.

I wasn't positive who *these* guys were, but I didn't need MacDermott's sharp intake of breath and muttered curse to tell me that the man lashed to a thick post was Phil Franklin.

The man was naked except for the tattered remains of his boxer shorts and a crisscross of whip welts that covered his body from shoulders to knees. Many of the welts were infected and suppurating.

One of the lounging soldiers laughed brutally and threw a gnawed bone at the bound man. "Don Francisco will be back tomorrow, cursed heretic dog," he jeered, "and with him will be the saintly Fra Julio, the arm of the Holy Office in this God-blasted hellhole. Then we shall have the blessing of Mother Church to reduce your blasphemous heretical body to ashes."

The Spanish was not that of the barrio, as I'd heard it spoken on the streets of Los Angeles, but I understood it well enough. The soldiers were awaiting the return of their leader with the representative of the Inquisition in this part of the New World. The holy friar carried with him the authority and terrible power of that obscene institution. Franklin would be sanctimoniously condemned and burned at the stake to which he was tied for the crime of being non-Catholic.

Old Angus touched me on the shoulder. I looked at him and he signaled to withdraw. We slithered silently down to the foot of the little rise, then rose and retreated several hundred yards. "The *bastards*," Angus swore, "You understand Spanish?"

"Yes. They're waiting for the Inquisitor, then they are going to burn him alive."

"Nice bunch of fellers. I caught that much of it, too. Well, it ain't gonna happen."

"No."

Old Angus looked at me. "You notice sumthin' wrong here?"

"I notice lots wrong. What in particular?"

The old Scot shoved his sombrero to the back of his head. "Look, sonny, I ain't *completely* illiterate. You ever read in your history books anywhere where th' Spanish Inquisition come t' th' New World?"

I gave a start. "No." I turned suddenly cold. "An alternate timeline! My God, I wonder what 1992 is like here if the Spaniards and that hellish institution continued

in power...."

MacDermott scrubbed his face with callused hands. "Sonny, that's sumptin' I don't care t' find out. Look , I reckon them fellers we seen around that campfire aren't the whole lot. I seen more equipment than I did men. There's some more of 'em about somewheres. 'Fore we can make any kind of a move, we got t' locate 'em." He looked at the little snubnose in my shoulder holster. "I don't reckon that popgun'll make much of a dent in them iron shirts them fellers were wearin'. Here." He drew the long-barreled .44 at his belt and handed it to me. "This'll make believers of 'em. Let's you and me mosey around and find out a few things."

We began a wide circle. I was wishing that the moon wasn't quite so bright, but a moment later I was thanking God that it was. Otherwise we'd have run into the sentry before we saw him.

Angus gave a sudden tug at my sleeve and dropped to the ground. I followed suit. He pointed and I made out the form of the Spanish lookout leaning against a rock. From beyond the sentry came the sounds of voices, clanking chains, and the crack of whips. The old man put a finger to his lips and drew that long, wicked-looking knife from his boot. Before it really hit me what he was about to do, he was a dozen yards away, snaking along on his belly and approaching the guard from the rear.

I could just make him out in the shadows as he rose silently to his feet. The two silhouettes merged into one. There was the soft sound of a thud and a muted gasp. One of the figures crumpled to the ground and the other waved an arm at me. Old Angus was wiping the blade of his knife on the soldier's doublet as I caught up. "There's *one* son of a bitch who won't be takin' no pleasure from watchin' a man burn to death," he grunted.

Behind the boulder on which the sentry had been leaning was a wide arroyo. Twenty or so Indians, shackled with leg-irons, naked and welled with whip-marks, toiled in the light of torches and the roaring fire beneath a large crucible in which yellow metal bubbled. Several of the Indians worked the bellows and the rest hacked at a shallow tunnel in the rock wall of the arroyo under the lash of brutal Spanish overseers. To one side was stacked a big pile of yellow ingots about five by five by twenty inches. MacDermott gave a silent whistle and we looked at each other.

Once again we retreated to hold a council of war. Angus chuckled. "Well, I guess we got th' answer t' where old Death Valley Scotty got all his gold." He sobered. "It wouldn't be no big problem t' blast them four guards," Angus said, "but th' shots would stir up them bastards holdin' Phil. We got t' cook us up a plan, sonny." The old man fell silent. "I wonder...."

"What?"

"Thet mule. He's th' key t' th' door t' this place,

but how big's th' door?"

"What do you mean?"

"Th' jeep. These skunks ain't never seen nothin' like it and it'd scare the hell out of 'em. What I'm wonderin' is: do we have t' be on th' mule t' git in here? Or could we walk alongside him? If so, how wide's th' door? Is it big enough fer th' jeep?" Angus looked at the moon. "Be daylight in about three hours and that's all the time we got to get old Phil outta here."

We went back to where we'd tethered the mule, mounted up and urged him into a clumsy gallop. We had no trouble following the hoofprints back to the 'door' and twenty minutes later Angus lit down by the jeep while I remained aboard. We weren't taking any chances on the critter wandering off.

With Angus walking alongside, we backtracked past the door and Angus, two feet away, stayed right with us. We went back and tried it again. Several times. The 'door' was approximately ten feet wide. Plenty wide enough for the jeep. The mule was the catalyst that activated the portal for some reason, but you didn't have to be in actual physical contact with him in order to pass through.

I rode the mule while MacDermott followed in the jeep. We again tied the patient creature to a saguaro and drove without headlights to within a hundred yards of the Spaniards' camp.

Old Angus looked at the campfire. "If I was a fergivin' man, I'd shoot in t' air. But I ain't," he looked at me. "Ready?"

I nodded.

"Then hit 'em with it, sonny, and let's you and me go to war."

I put the jeep in gear and floored the pedal. Sand sprayed in all directions. At fifty yards, I flipped on the headlights and bore down on the horn. Old Angus was firing and reloading the shotgun faster than you'd have thought possible. We roared into the *Conquistadores'* camp.

The Spaniards were blinded by the headlights, which they must have taken to be the burning eyes of some demon out of Hell. The blaring horn added to their panic and terror. Several fell to the old Scot's shotgun fire and the rest dropped their weapons and ran, crossing themselves and calling on a dozen saints to save them. Old Angus emptied both barrels after the fleeing soldiers, dropping two more of them. He grunted with satisfaction. I leaped from the jeep and slashed Franklin's bonds, lowering him gently to the ground. MacDermott knelt beside his friend. "You gonna make it, Phil?"

"You bet your ass, old timer. Go get the rest of 'em."

The old Scot patted Franklin's shoulder. He grinned. "You just go on goldbrickin' old buddy. Me and



th' kid'll be back 'fore you know it." He stood. "Come on, sonny, let's chase th' rest of them rattlesnakes."

The rest of the 'rattlesnakes' had already disappeared by the time we drove to the mine. The Indian slaves, hampered by their leg-irons, were clumsily shuffling in all directions to escape. Angus stood up in the seat. "I heard some of 'em jabberin'. Sounds like Kiowa. Mebby I can talk to 'em."

He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted something unintelligible. Several of the Indians paused and looked back. The old Scot shouted again, adding to what he'd said. The Indians began to return, hesitant and fearful.

Angus chuckled. "I told 'em I'm th' Great Spirit and I come t' free 'em from the Spaniards. I told 'em that th' beast with th' fiery eyes is my medicine and won't hurt 'em. See if you can find an axe or a chisel or somethin' we can chop th' leg-irons off them poor bastards." The old man got down from the jeep, and keeping his shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm just in case, walked toward the cringing natives, still speaking in a soothing tone. The Indians came up to him and dropped to their knees, touching their foreheads to the ground. The old Scot spoke sharply, ordering them to get up.

Angus took the hammer and chisel I'd found and cut the leg-irons off one man. He handed the tools to the man and told him to free his fellows. "Come on, sonny, we got to get back to old Phil."

Franklin's hurts, it turned out, weren't as serious as they looked. Movement was painful and he needed

attention for those infected whip-cuts, but no bones were broken and he'd suffered no internal injuries. He was in amazingly good shape for what he'd been through.

Angus checked the declination of the moon. "Less'n an hour 'til sunup. We don't know 'zactly how soon them bastards' Big Boss is due ner how many men he's got with him. I suggest we skedaddle *muy pronto*."

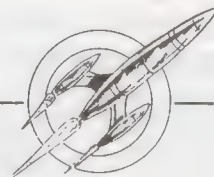
Phil Franklin grinned at his partner. "We got time to load up th' jeep with some of that Spanish gold, I reckon." His grin broadened. "Pretty good strike I made, wouldn't you say?"

MacDermott chuckled. "Yep."

The jeep-load of gold assayed out to a little over one and a quarter million dollars. Not half bad for one night's work.

Me? I'm out of the private eye gig. Diana talked me into becoming a prospector.

Soon as my new father-in-law is fully recovered from his ordeal, he and Angus and I are going to take a little mule ride. Only this time we know what we'll be going up against and we'll be better prepared...and better armed.

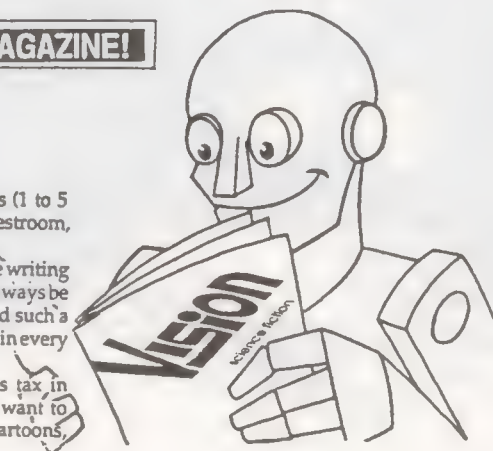


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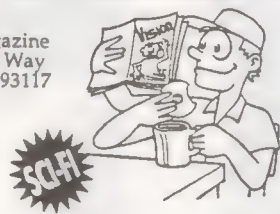
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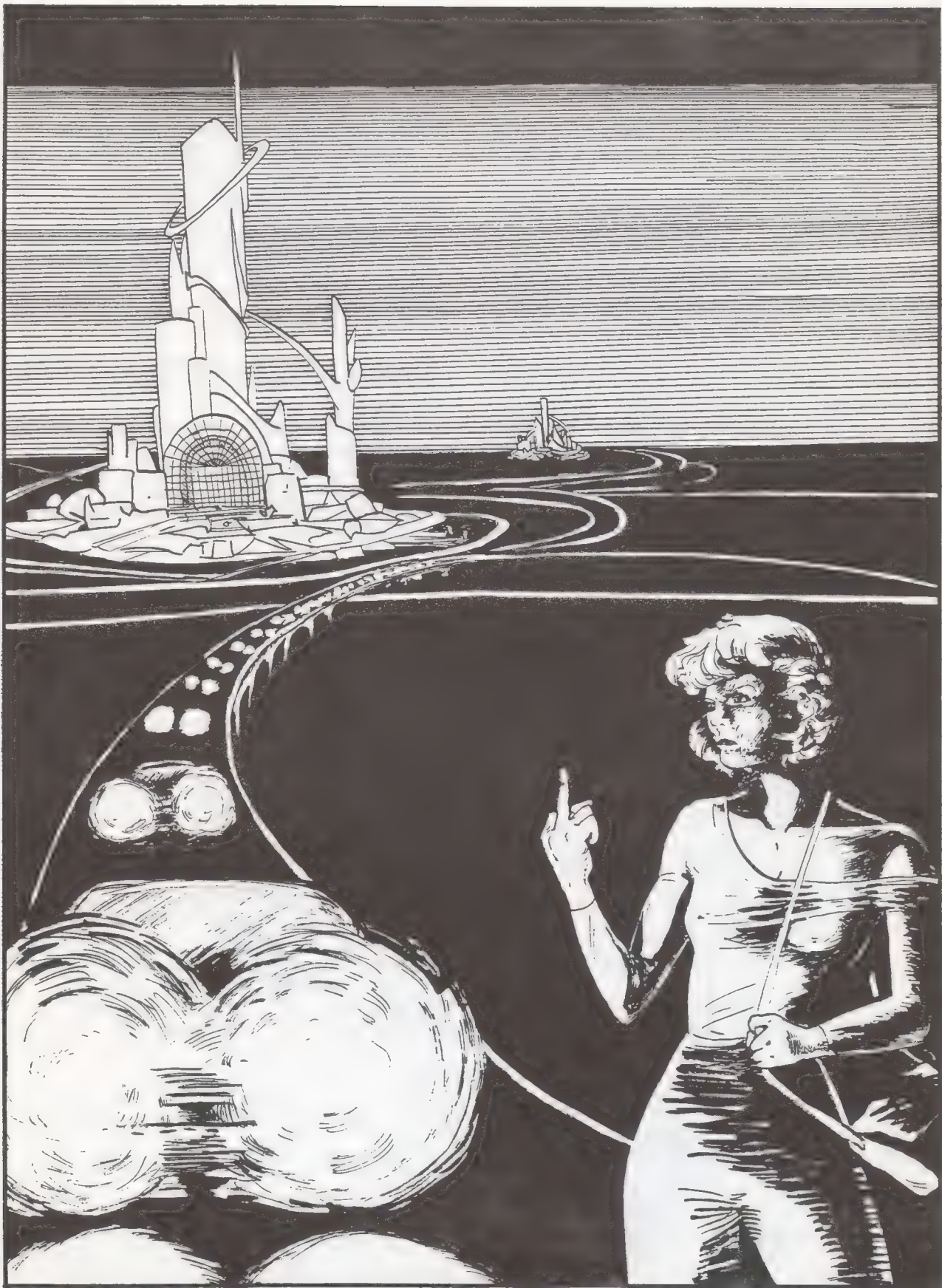


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# Peds

by  
James S. Dorr

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Islands.

That's what Robert Balkoner thought of as he drove through the night-dimmed city. Islands of brightness. Faerie towers that pierced the sky.

Julie beside him, green-robed and glossy, from one of those islands and, on the horizon, the rose-lit arches and minarets of the castle that was their destination.

"Jesus," he whispered. Ahead, a flash of white.

"What is it, Robert?"

He wrestled the car into manual drive, swerving it out of its pre-assigned course just in time to avoid smashing into the running figure. He watched as the figure spun back into darkness -- the dark of the vast crumbling lowland ocean that surrounded the city's bright islands.

"Nothing, darling," he said as he felt the car give itself back to computer control. He tried to relax in his foam-padded seat, stretching his arm to gather in Julie.

"Nothing," he said again, nuzzling her hair. "We'll get to the party in plenty of time. It was just a pedestrian."

Just a pedestrian. Trying to make it across the expressway. The figure had seemed to freeze for a moment in the automobile's rear viewscreen. A female figure, slim and blonde -- not red-haired like Julie -- who made a point of whirling and flashing an obscene gesture as Balkoner sped by.

"Just a lousy ped," Julie murmured, nuzzling back. She sighed, then kissed him. "Hope you ran over the bastard," she said as she pressed her body closer against his.

Julie's remark still bothered Balkoner, especially since, when Julie told about the incident at the party, most of the guests expressed similar thoughts. Even the host, just re-elected City Councilor Andrew Tolan, took him aside later in the evening.

"Listen," he said. "You should have run over him -- or her -- whatever it was. You've got to remember these

peds are just leeches -- welfare people. If they wanted to work for a living, they could afford cars. They could make payments just like we do and live in a decent part of the city instead of the slums. They've made their choice, Balkoner, part of which is that they're supposed to stay off the highway."

"I don't know, Andrew," Balkoner said. "Some of them must have had cars before -- before whatever it was that happened to make them peds. But, when they had to apply for public assistance, doesn't the law confiscate their cars?"

"Along with whatever else they have that can be sold to help pay their keep, yes. That's just the point." Councilor Tolan was a man of Balkoner's height, of about the same age but already starting to show the paunch that betokened a rising career in government. "Look," he went on. "Part of my job is to deal with these things. I've heard the arguments. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that tax money, yours and mine, supports these peds. Allows them to live anywhere they want in their part of the city -- which, I might add, means most of the city. Gives them free food in the robot kitchens. And, in return for which, they don't have to do one damn thing."

Balkoner nodded -- he'd heard the arguments too, but he'd never been really convinced. "I guess you know more about it than I do," he finally said. "Still, what if one of them had a job offer? Maybe in some other part of town that was too far to walk to. Suppose...."

Tolan waved him off. "I know, Balkoner. Some do get jobs too. But -- and I have the statistics on this -- it's only a small fraction of the total. Because, like I say, the vast majority of these people *like* to be leeches. They like to live free, off of *our* taxes. And that's why I say, too, that if you killed one accidentally out on the highway, there isn't a cop in the whole damn city who'd even ask any questions about it."

"What'd I tell you?" Julie said, giggling. Balkoner turned -- when he'd last seen her, she'd been trying a new inhalant with a pair of women she'd just met. From the

sound of her giggle now, he knew she hadn't stopped at just one.

"Julie," he said. He took her hand -- let her lean against him. "Have you met our host yet, Councilor Tolan? He and I went to school together and...."

"Glad to meetcha," Julie said. She giggled again. "Liked whatcha said about hitting peds -- one less person to have to take care of -- 'cept Robert here, he tries to miss 'em."

Balkoner took her home shortly afterward -- something else someone said bothered him too. About how motorists ought to be more aggressive driving because some pedestrians tried to get *them*.

He tried to imagine. What could a ped do against a car? But then he thought about the blonde figure, how close she'd been to him. Maybe if she'd had a gun or something. Although, of course, any firearms people might have been taken as well when they went on assistance.

He shrugged it off -- then he felt the car swerve.

He blinked -- looked at Julie -- saw her twist the wheel to the right. Saw that she'd reached across the dashboard and already punched the car into manual.

"Julie, what...?"

He heard the thump, felt the car slewing -- first farther to the right -- then back to the left. He wrestled with Julie for the wheel, then shifted it back to computer drive.

"Julie, we hit something!"

Even on automatic control, the car seemed to wobble.

"Just some kind of goddamn animal," Julie mumbled. "Like maybe some kind of dog or something."

He looked at the viewscreen, turned up its magnification and set it to rear scan. He saw, in the road behind the car, a large, sprawled-out lump. Maybe a large dog, as Julie had said. Or....

"I wanted to hit a goddamn ped."

He didn't stay after he let Julie off, even though she had giggled again and invited him in. He worried about her, about her attitudes, even if he realized she'd sniffed to many inhalants not to be high. Even Councilor Tolan had been high -- it had been the inhalants talking. Councilor Tolan, who normally was the most sober defender of every person who dwelled in the city.

Still, he wondered. What if somebody *did* kill a pedestrian? Would the police even know about it? It wasn't as though they patrolled the highways, like back in the days before the computer grid took care of directing traffic. Nor were they needed to help stranded motorists -- now, with hydrogen fusion packs, fuel lasted a lifetime, while cars were programmed to self-repair, or at least warn their drivers of anything serious. Therefore, the only way you would find out about a killing would be if the driver himself reported it.

He shrugged, then glanced at the dashboard lights. All systems were green, even if he still thought he felt the slight vibration he'd noticed when Julie had hit that...that thing.

Then he looked up.

My God, he thought, as he grabbed for the wheel. A pedestrian had just jumped out in front of him, out of the blackness. Had thrown something at him, then jumped back only instants before....

He punched his car into manual drive -- another ped, just ahead, seemingly beckoning. He wrenched the car over, barely missing this one as well.

And then a thump. From the highway divider. He pulled the wheel back, wrestling the car back into his own lane. He let the computer take over again -- thank goodness there weren't any more peds ahead. At least, not that he could see.

He'd taken too many inhalants himself -- he realized that now. Thank God for computers that could get him home. He peered through the windshield, saw the dark highway stretching before him, from brightly lighted island to island, nearly deserted at this time of night. And below, as his vision dropped to the dashboard, similar islands of bright green lights.

Reassuring.

Except, as the car's vibration got worse, one, then a second, flashed over to red.

Car's didn't break down.

At the worst, they warned you in plenty of time to have them repaired.

They were guaranteed.

But then another light and another -- a cluster of pinpoint jewels of safety -- winked to amber and then to red.

Cars didn't break down, but -- the dashboard lights faded. The car went to manual, its power dying.

Once, at his workplace, a computer broke down. They were guaranteed as well.

He pulled at the wheel -- the car was drifting. He couldn't move it. He tightened his seatbelt -- the old-fashioned seatbelt that the law still required cars to have -- and he wondered....

What if a *driver* got killed?

Would anyone know *that*?

People were always changing jobs, moving to different parts of the city, or even to different city-states. Occasionally on such short a notice that even their boss wouldn't know they'd left until their pay credits came back uncashed.

He flinched as his car hit the highway's safety rail. This time kept going, shuddering, sideways, down an embankment and on to a rough, level surface below.

And rolled to a final stop in the darkness.



Shaken, Balkoner left the car. He reached down to the surface he stood on and felt its hard roughness, then looked around him. On one side he could make out huge black shapes hanging over him, like burned out buildings; on the other side stretched the embankment.

He tried to climb up the path his car had taken, up to the lights he could see far above him, but it was too steep.

He tried to think, to will himself to stay with his car, to wait until morning.

But panic took over.

He ran through the darkness, along the level path, only dimly aware when it curved away from the highway. He ran past cross paths, on either side of him, sometimes turning when he thought he saw glimmers of light. He ran, always farther, twisting and turning as if through some kind of scientist's maze, until he fell, panting, struggling for breath.

The next thing he knew was the dimness of morning.

He stood up, slowly, stretching the hurt stiffness out of his muscles, smelling the acrid air of dawn. He turned and started to walk back the way he thought he had come.

He looked as he walked and saw jagged buildings, not of the sort he or Julie might live in, but squat and ugly, with boarded-up windows, none of them more than three stories high. He stopped in front of one, reaching out and feeling its surface of greasy brick.

A whistle blew, suddenly, shrieking at him. He turned and ran away from the building, then turned again, ducking into an alley.

He heard, behind him, a tearing noise of wood against metal, then smelled another odor. This one a smell of grease and leather.

"Hey, mate, you new here?" a gravelly voice called.

He whirled to face a dark, bearded man of indeterminate middle age, dressed in drab clothing.

"I -- I'm --" He didn't know what to say.

"My name's Gart," the older man said. "Guess you must be new, not to respond to the breakfast whistle. Best follow me, anyway."

"Y-yes. I-I thank you." Balkoner extended his hand. "My name is Robert."

"Call you 'Rob' here, then," the older man said. "Don't stand much on formalities in Ped City, though you're the first one to just be dropped on the street like this, without even an orientation session."

Balkoner nodded, then followed Gart through a network of narrow, often still dark streets. Without an orientation session? He started to speak -- the man must think that he was a ped too. Then thought better of it.

Maybe he *was* a ped now, he thought. Even if not, in a formal sense, on public assistance. Maybe he'd

better just keep his mouth shut until he learned a little more about the world he found himself in.

And how to get out of it.

Three days later, he spotted the woman. The one with short, loosely curled blonde hair he had nearly hit -- it seemed more like it was three months before. He had moved in with Gart and begun to learn how "Ped City" worked, was surprised, in fact, to discover that, even if they were on public assistance, most of the Peds still had jobs of a sort.

He had discovered this when, the second day, Gart had taken him behind the building they lived in. The smell of leather he had noticed the first time Gart had come up behind him grew stronger as they approached the back entrance and, when Gart opened the heavy door that led outside, he saw that the courtyard was filled with trestles covered with drying scraps of hide.

"These are throwaways from the Enclaves," Gart said, as he showed him how to see which ones were dry, and to turn them over to expose their other sides to the sun and air. "Most of them have faults of one sort or another, so the Riders don't like to use them. What I do is to make sure they're sound -- to cut out any spots that are rotting -- then wash them and oil them and make them into things to supplement the clothing they give us on the dole."

"Uh, wait just a minute. The 'Enclaves?' The 'Riders?' And -- you mean you aren't given shoes on public assistance?"

Gart laughed. "Yeah, we get shoes. Plastic shoes that hurt your feet and wear out within weeks. The same with everything else we get: really low in quality -- Rider garbage. The Riders, well, they're the people with cars, just like you and me used to be before we lost our Enclave jobs, or lost our money, or just got thrown out for whatever reason. And Enclaves are what we call where they live -- where we used to live too. The newer, built up parts of the city." He laughed again and this time Balkoner could hear the tinge of bitterness that was beneath it. "You know what I mean, Rob. The towers where the lights are at night. The ones that you and I can't get back into."

"I used to think of them as islands," Balkoner said, half to himself. "And the city -- this city -- as a sort of dark, featureless sea. Of course, that's what it looks like when you're on the expressway. But you mean, then, that you have other industries too?"

"When you're on foot, they're more like fortresses, ringed with eight and twelve-lane concrete moats. But, yeah, we have other industries too. Some vegetable gardeners, when we can get seed -- the food we're given fills you up, but it isn't exactly high in nutrition. Carpenters to fix up these buildings enough to make them safe to live in. A few metal workers. We even have artists.

Artists. Balkoner remembered -- of course there were artists. Once, to celebrate Julie's birthday, he had bought her a pair of earrings that he had been told had been made by craftspeople who lived by choice outside the towers. Primitive looking, expensive earrings, yet wildly beautiful in their way -- and, even more important to Julie, the "in" thing in fashion.

In fact, she'd been wearing them the night -- only three nights ago -- that he'd nearly run over the woman he now saw striding past the public kitchen where he and Gart were having their dinner.

He grabbed Gart's shoulder. "Who's that?" he asked.

"You mean Cyn? That's what we call her. Cynthia's what she puts on her work."

"Puts on her work?"

Gart nodded. "Yeah. Cyn's one of our sector's best known artists."

Two days later he saw Cyn again, this time talking to a balding, heavyset man who Gart said was named Marcus. "He's a negotiator," Gart added. "Sort of like what you'd call a councilor in the Enclaves except, in Cyn's case, something like an agent as well."

"I don't understand," Balkoner said. "You say like a councilor -- you mean you have your own government, too? Even have elections?"

Gart laughed, this time with what seemed to be real amusement. "Elections, hell. Most of us are society's losers even before we ended up being kicked out of the Enclaves. Not that we didn't work as hard as the next person there -- we just didn't fit in. We're natural anarchists -- even Cyn -- even if she doesn't want to admit it. Like all the rest of us, negotiators are self appointed, because no one else wants the job."

"Uh...what do you mean? What kind of job?"

Gart laughed harder. "Yeah, I keep forgetting. You're still new here. What a person like Marcus does is have meetings with councilors from the Enclaves to sell them some of the things we make here. Like Cyn's jewelry and metal sculptures. What he does is negotiate to get a price which he can then trade for tools or leather or cloth or seeds, whatever the Enclave he's dealing with is willing to give us. But Cyn, she thinks her stuff is worth more. That's why she keeps having fights with Marcus, threatening that she's going to organize all the artists, all over the city, to form a guild."

Balkoner thought of the earrings again -- of what he had paid when he'd bought them for Julie. Of how many worn out tools that would buy and how much torn and half-rotted leather. "Cyn may not have a bad point," he said. "But this guy, Marcus, do you suppose he knew Councilor Tolan?"

"If that's one of the Enclaves' clothiers, yeah. Chances are that he's at least met him."

Balkoner nodded. If he could get to see Councilor Tolan -- his friend, Andrew Tolan, Andrew who thought, at least when he'd had too many inhalants, that Peds were all leeches -- if he could tell Andrew what he now knew about the sectors between the Enclaves, as the Peds called them, not only would he be rescued himself, but maybe he could help some of them too.

"Gart," he finally said, "you've got to help me. I've got to meet Marcus."

He got his chance when Gart held a party to celebrate a new shipment of cowhides, most scarcely damaged. Marcus, of course, was the guest of honor since he had negotiated the deal, and Cyn, whose work was in one of the lots that had been traded for it, was there as well. In fact, the two of them were arguing just like they'd been the first time Balkoner saw them together, when he approached them.

"You're Rob, aren't you?" Cyn asked, before he even had a chance to open his mouth. "You're the new guy -- the one Gart found. That means you've been in the Enclaves recently and you must have shopped in their markets." She pointed at the earrings she was wearing -- large, boldly lacquered dangles, similar to the ones he had bought Julie. "How much do you think these would sell for?"

"I...", Balkoner hesitated, not wanting to have to take sides. "I...uh...how do you know who I am anyway? Gart hasn't really introduced me to anyone yet and I..."

Cyn laughed, a pleasant, friendly laugh -- not the hard, know-it-all laugh of a woman like Julie. "Oh, I keep up with the gossip," she said. "Both what they say here" -- she paused and glanced back at Marcus again -- "and in other sectors."

"Other sectors?" Gart asked.

"She's a runner," Marcus cut in. "She crosses the highway at night between sectors. I've warned her about it -- even if traffic thins out after dark, it's still too fast for a runner to dodge."

"You just don't like me comparing prices," Cyn said. "You don't like me talking to artisans in other sectors and finding out what *their* negotiators bring in. Nevertheless, Marcus, one of these days we'll set our own prices. You'll see, Marcus. We'll..."

"Nonsense, Cyn. Like I say, it's simply too dangerous for people to travel outside their home sectors. You're too good an artist for us to risk losing -- that's all I mean. But we're being rude. This nice young man, who you say Gart's taken under his wing, has come to talk to us." He turned to Balkoner. "What do you want, son?"

"I...uh...you're Negotiator Marcus?" I understand you might know Councilor Tolan. I...I'm not really on public assistance -- I'm here by mistake -- and if I could speak to Councilor Tolan I could get him to straighten it out. That is, if you could take me with you the next time



you see him, I...."

Marcus smiled and laid a large, fleshy hand on Balkoner's shoulder. "I understand, son," he said. "Everyone, when they first come here, thinks they're here by some mistake. But you'll get by -- Rob, is that your name? You're a fine, strong, strapping young man -- I'll bet you're scarcely older than Cyn -- and you'll find a place here. Maybe Gart'll let you be his apprentice, or even Cyn, if you think you have an artistic bent. Or...."

"No, sir, honest. I'm a friend of Councilor Tolan. If you could help me get to see him" -- he glanced at Cyn and saw she was smiling, a genuine smile that seemed to be directed at him -- "I could help her too. And people like her -- like maybe Gart, after he's made his boots out of his leather, could sell extra pairs in the Enclaves too. And I could help you when you discuss prices with Councilor Tolan and help you make sure that what you got was a fair price. I could...."

Marcus' own smile had disappeared. "I wish I could help you, but I can only go into the Enclaves by myself, on a special pass. They bring a car for me, but it's a two-seater, sent specifically so nobody else can come with me. The reason is, if I brought someone else, they might not understand that the few things the Enclaves buy from us are bought as a charity. You know yourself -- you can see Cyn's earrings. They're pretty enough, in a gaudy way, but compared with what the Enclaves can make, you can see how crude they are. How they can't be worth much except, maybe, for children."

Balkoner felt himself turning red -- the earrings he'd bought for Julie that time were certainly not being sold for children. He started to speak, but felt his hand gripped in both of Marcus' large, moist palms.

"I really have to see someone else now, son. But why don't you have a nice talk with Cyn? Just remember that, while the things she makes are good, and she's justly proud of them, they aren't worth nearly as much to the Riders as we'd all like to think. And remember this, too" -- he paused and smiled, once more, down on Balkoner -- "just remember that I am your sector's negotiator. If you have any genuine problem...something you need...."

Marcus' voice hung in the air behind him as he scuttled across the room to a table where actual drinks were being served. Balkoner wanted to chase him and grab him -- make him realize he had to meet with Tolan. But what could he do?

He turned back to Cyn and saw that she, too, had been staring at Marcus as he retreated. "He's lying, you know," she said in a whisper.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The reason he refuses to help you meet this Tolan. It's not that he doesn't believe that you know him. The thing is, on every piece that he sells, he gets a part of the profit. I know this because I know the other negotiators get kickbacks in other sectors. But it's on a

percentage basis so, the less we artists get, the bigger his share is. That's why he doesn't want me to get the artists together -- not because he thinks it's too dangerous for me to cross into other sectors. And that's why, especially, he doesn't want anyone like you screwing up the works by telling the councilors what's really happening."

"I....," Balkoner had a sudden idea. "I -- I mean you do go from sector to sector, across the highways, and nobody stops you?" He thought of her pinned in his automobile's lights, how barely he'd missed her. "I mean, surely, as Marcus says, some people are killed...."

"Yes, some people are. Even more these days than before -- the rumor is that some Riders now are deliberately trying to run over Peds as a kind of sport. But what's the alternative? Just stay trapped in your own little sector? Isolated and at the mercy of people like Marcus?"

"Then why don't you be a negotiator too? Gart says they just appoint themselves. Then you could speak with people like Councilor Tolan directly. Get fair prices. Get police to patrol the highways -- they used to once -- and enforce speed limits. Make special places, like maybe tunnels or overhead walkways, where Peds could cross safely to other sectors if they wished to."

Cyn laughed softly, then kissed Balkoner on the cheek. "I like you, Rob, but it's not that simple. Gart's right in theory -- there aren't any rules that say you can't do something if you want to -- but when it comes to negotiating, you've got to be screened by the Enclaves before they'll accept you. And, once there's someone they will accept, he's got that job for as long as he wants it."

"I guess I see what you're getting at," Balkoner said. "If there were two negotiators in a sector, and if they disagreed about something, which one would the councilors deal with? So, of course, as long as Marcus...."

Cyn nodded. "As long as it's Marcus, and he and the others stick together, all the councilors really hear is the negotiators' version of things. But hey, Rob, I really do like you. And there was one thing that Marcus said -- about if you're of an artistic bent. I mean I, uh, *am* looking for an apprentice...."

Balkoner had been working with Cyn for just over a month when a thought came to him. "I wonder," he said, after she'd spent an especially long night away from their sector, "if, some time, I might cross the highway with you."

"You mean be a runner?" Cyn looked at him steadily for several seconds. "Realize that there isn't just one highway," she finally continued. "Ped City is like a patchwork quilt, divided in smaller and smaller pieces as the expressways keep expanding, and some of the sectors I'm visiting now are three, even four, highway crossings away. And, as time goes on, I'll be going out farther...."

"I used to run when I was in college," Balkoner said. "I was on the track team. Granted, I may be out of training, but I can come back."

Cyn laughed. "I'll bet you can, Rob. But I'm learning the way your mind works, too. Is there anything else you have in mind other than just keeping me company when I'm away?"

Balkoner laughed too. "Yeah, there's something. It didn't occur to me until today, but it's really so simple. If Marcus won't take me to see Councilor Tolan, why not just walk to the Enclave he lives in and see him myself?"

Cyn's voice took on a serious tone. "Rob, I'm not sure you know what you're proposing. First of all, none of the Enclaves is really near here. We'd have to pass through maybe five or six sectors just to get to the closest one -- and some of the sectors are different from this one. Even with me along as a guide, they're easy for strangers to lose their way in."

"So? We wouldn't have to make the whole distance in just on night, would we? That way, if we were in a strange sector and we got lost, we could always just wait until the next day to find our way out."

Cyn nodded. "True enough, Rob. We'd be talking about several night's journey in any event. But, after we'd passed through the lived-in sectors surrounding the Enclave we wanted to visit, we'd then have to cross its outer loop of feeder radials and, once we were over that, its deserted lands...."

"Its 'deserted lands,' Cyn?"

"Narrow strips between the radials where, as the Enclave began to expand, the original people were pushed out and the buildings destroyed. Because they're so near, Peds aren't allowed to resettle there, and rumor has it that, just to make sure they stay deserted, they're sometimes patrolled by packs of wild dogs."

"Patrolled by dogs," Balkoner said. He thought of the animal Julie had hit that night -- it seemed like almost a lifetime ago -- he had driven her home. She'd said she had thought it was some kind of dog. "Well, maybe we can bring some kind of equipment with us -- make clubs or something to protect ourselves with. But, after we've crossed these deserted lands...?"

"Then there'd be the inner beltway. Rob, I don't want to make it sound as if the Enclaves are purposely built to be unreachable, but I hear rumors. And, like the dogs, one of the rumors is that no Ped *ever* has successfully crossed a beltway. Those can be up to twenty lanes wide -- sometimes more -- you know what they're like from a Rider's viewpoint. And, unlike the highways farther out, there's no time of night when their traffic slackens...."

"Yeah, I know the beltways. Mass confusion." He tried to make his voice sound lighter. "But twenty lanes wide is still only ten in each direction and, to some extent, that confusion could work in our favor. I've been thinking of another rumor you told me -- about how some Riders are supposed to deliberately try to run over Peds. At least on a beltway no one would *dare* take his car off

automatic control."

Cyn nodded, looking as if she was thinking seriously about what Balkoner had just said, then suddenly burst into a grin. "Part of what you'll need to know about running -- what I'll have to show you before we can talk any further about this plan -- is that a car on automatic follows a fairly predictable path. A lot of the danger is when a Rider switches to manual -- even when he's trying to *miss you*. But, if the beltways are all automatic...."

Balkoner grinned as well. "You mean you think there's a chance I could make it? Could get to see Tolan?"

"Well, I'll put it this way. Suppose we did manage to cross the beltway -- and don't think I'd let you try it alone. Even if this Councilor Tolan refused to see you, our names would be famous. Other runners would tell our story. The rumors would spread. And, if I then showed up in a sector, however far away, offering to organize its artists, we'd end up forming a guild so strong that not even *all* the Councilor Tolans would dare stand against us."

When they had told Gart about what they planned, he had insisted that he would go with them. "It won't work, of course," he added. "I mean just trying to talk to this Tolan. But, if we can find a way past the beltways so that *others* can follow. Then, just maybe,...."

"What do you mean, Gart?" Balkoner asked.

"Cyn knows what I mean -- and it's not that I haven't said it before. It's why her idea of forming a guild isn't going to work either. Because you're assuming that, if you get to speak to the Riders, they'll listen to reason. But these are the people who threw us out and, even if you think that one was your friend before, the only thing they're going to listen to is a whole *group* of Peds -- Peds with *weapons* -- showing up on their doorstep some morning."

"Now wait just a minute," Balkoner said.

"No, both of *you* wait," Cyn interrupted. "First off, Gart, you're welcome to come. But just remember this. I'm the one who's the experienced runner: the one who knows how to plan a crossing; who knows when to dodge and when it's best to just try a straight run. What that means is, I am going to be the leader. Is that understood?"

Gart and Balkoner looked at each other, then both nodded slowly.

"Good. Then we'll try Rob's plan first -- we'll *talk* to his friend. That is, if we make it all the way in. If that doesn't work, then we'll try something else. So, now that that's settled, I want you both up the first thing tomorrow to start your training."

That was the first thing Balkoner remembered of what then became the most intensive two weeks of his life. The second was when Cyn finally let him accompany her on a run to the north of their home sector. It wasn't his first run -- or even his first on a six-lane highway -- but it



was the first time Cyn had announced that they would be gone for more than one night.

By mid-afternoon the following day they'd come to a sector larger than any he'd been to before, and one with a central expanse of land that had been cleared of buildings. "This was a park at one time," Cyn said. She pointed out the patchwork of furrows that now broke the ground from one end to the other where it was level, the rows of trees that climbed its hills. "You remember the fruit we had for breakfast that morning last week? And the salads we've had with our dinners? Here's where they came from."

"You mean, there are actually Ped farms? Gart said something about there being gardeners when I first got here, but I just assumed -- I mean, when we had stuff like that so often -- that most of it must have come from the Enclaves."

Cyn laughed. "It's the other way around, Rob. Sectors like this trade the best of their produce to the Enclaves, just like the artists, like me, trade jewelry. In fact, one reason I'm interested in trying to form an artist's guild is that, if the idea catches on perhaps other groups could form guilds as well. As it is, only the most perfect fruit and vegetables are accepted -- as luxury items for Rider gourmets. A lot is going to waste, even though some goes to sectors like ours in trade for things we make. But runners can carry only so much across the highways and...."

Cyn broke off and waved to someone who seemed to know her. She had Balkoner wait while she went off with him and, after what seemed like several hours, she came back with food. "I told him we wanted to climb the tower" -- she pointed to a low stone structure on top of the highest of the hills -- "and that we'd miss dinner. He gave us this, in exchange for which we'll pick up our packs on the way out to take back with us to the home sector."

Balkoner nodded and ate the fruit she handed to him. When they visited other sectors, they usually ate in the public kitchens, accepting what the robot servers had for the day. The contrast now, between accepting the robot provided blandness and what the Peds could provide for themselves given the resources, was sharp enough to make him realize why someone like Gart could become so bitter.

They took their time, enjoying their meal, until the afternoon was almost over. "Now," Cyn said. She pointed again to the highest hill and led him up a winding path between the fruit trees. When they reached the top, they climbed the tower.

"Now," Cyn said again, "what I want you to do, Rob, is point out which Enclave your friend Tolan lives in."

Balkoner looked out to the horizon -- the image of islands adrift in a vast sea suddenly came back to his mind. Except, he now knew that this sea was filled with

people.

"Cyn, I don't know. The Enclaves look different." He turned to look in another direction, but still couldn't distinguish one Enclave from another.

"Watch carefully, Rob," Cyn said, standing close to him. "The sun is setting -- they're turning their lights on, like sparkling jewels set on string-like highways. I know they look different just standing here. Not seeing them approach or recede, as Riders see them, but seeing them just laid out before us, as if we might touch them...."

"You mean seeing them the way Peds do, Cyn? As Gart must see them?"

"Yes, as Gart sees them -- in that case, as jewels surrounded by bands of deadly light. Uncrossable bands. But that's not the reason I took you up here. I want you to remember what you would see from your car when you went to see Tolan. A building. A pattern. Maybe something you'd see on the way that you could find now, then trace the string from it to where you were going. We have to know, Rob."

"Yes," Balkoner said. It hadn't occurred to him until now that they *did* have to know. If they would run to Tolan's Enclave, they had to first know which one it was. They had to know how many highways they had cross to get there. Which ones were most dangerous. And yet, from a Ped's eye view, everything he saw looked so *different*."

"Try to remember the view from your car," Cyn prompted again. "I know the computer guided you there, but what would you see? A light? A color? How would you know when you were getting near?"

A light. A color. The Enclaves sparkled as darkness deepened, islands in a jet-black sea -- and he did remember. A view, from the highway, of rose-colored arches.

He looked to the right. Behind him. Then, again, to the left. Green lights, purple lights. Then, farther left, surprisingly near.

"That one, Cyn!" He took her shoulders, turned her to look. "See there? The towers? The pink light shining on that connecting archway between them?"

"That's Tolan's Enclave?"

He turned her again. Kissed her hard. "It's not so far away, is it Cyn?"

She let him embrace her. "It's not so far, no. Three more highways north. Then the feeders. Then the beltway, nicely divided. Not as dangerous as some of the beltways."

"You mean we can make it?"

He heard her laugh. Felt her lips against his.

This time, *she* kissed *him*.

The third thing Balkoner remembered was after they had started their journey. It was almost a casual thing -- a thing Gart said as much to himself as to Cyn and

him. He had helped the others pack supplies, including the clubs that Gart had made to protect them in the deserted lands if they met with dogs. The crossings thus far had been easy until they reached the first radial feeder -- the first of the highways that formed a wide arc around the Enclave they wanted to enter. This was the first road where, even at night, the traffic never seemed to slacken.

They decided to rest. It was Cyn's suggestion that they might as well wait until dawn when, at least, they could better see what they were up against.

And it was then that Gart remarked that, perhaps, the progress they'd made thus far had been *too* easy.

"What do you mean?" Cyn asked.

"I didn't want to say it before, but, the night before we left, Marcus came to see me. You know how rumors spread around Ped City, Cyn. What we're trying to accomplish is pretty well known."

"Yes," Cyn said. "I certainly haven't tried to keep it a secret myself. I think it's important that people know that there are things we can do to bring our needs to the Enclaves' attention. Things we can do, working together."

"Well," Gart continued, "Marcus said first that it wouldn't work. He said he'd talked to this Councilor Tolan. Tolan had asked him point blank why we wanted to change the system."

"Now wait a minute," Balkoner broke in. "No one's trying to change the system. Improve it, yes -- that's Cyn's idea. And, in my case, all I'd originally wanted to do was correct a mistake; to let Tolan know I was here by accident. But, as I've seen what things are like here -- that not all Peds are the down and out, lazy, welfare parasites that so many Riders think they are -- I've begun to realize that Cyn is right. That...."

"That's not how Marcus or Tolan see it. Nor, to be honest, how I see it either. You know I've told you and Cyn often enough that I think the system *does* have to be changed; to be changed by force. Right now the Riders, at least those in charge, see people like Cyn -- see all of us, really -- as a source of cheap goods and labor that they can exploit, with people like Marcus and Rob's friend, Tolan, skimming the profit. But that's not what bothered me. What did was that Marcus, after he tried to argue me out of going with you, suggested that the trip might be dangerous. That maybe some of us wouldn't survive."

"Well," Cyn said. "He's always told me that I shouldn't risk my life crossing the highways. And Peds *do* get killed -- at least those who don't know what they're doing. That's why some Peds are fighting back -- spotting a car that's alone in its lane and jumping out, trying to confuse the driver, to make it crash -- like what happened to you, Rob."

"What happened to me?" Balkoner saw, once again, the dark highway...the Peds who had suddenly thrown something at him -- the second who jumped out, right in his path -- forcing him to wrench his car over --

feeling the thump when he hit the divider.

Watching his dashboard lights turn to red, one after the other, as his car wobbled...slowed...went through the highway rail into darkness....

"How do you know this?" he finally asked.

"I didn't know that it was you when it happened," Cyn answered, "just that a car, apparently somehow already damaged, had gone off the road. The rest I pieced together from rumors, then added in things like when Gart said he found you. Things you said yourself, as well. But neither Gart nor I had anything to do with it, despite Gart's talk about using violence. These are young people, teenagers mostly, some who were actually born in Ped City. People who think they can never get out, and react in frustration."

"But, then, you mean there are other Riders, people like me, who are here by accident? People who crashed?"

"Not many," Cyn said, "you were lucky. Because of the damage to your car, you were almost stopped already when you left the highway. To put it bluntly, most people who crash -- and there have been others -- don't live to be citizens of Ped City."

"Then it works both ways," Balkoner said. "Someone tried to kill me -- is that what you're saying? Just like some Riders supposedly try to run over Peds?"

Cyn nodded. "Yes, it works both ways. Violence breeds violence, killing breeds killing, hate breeds hate. That's what I hope we'll be able to stop."

When morning came, the immensity of what they hoped to do sank in on Balkoner for perhaps the first time. The smaller highways, crossed at night, had seemed like isolated patches of light-speckled darkness. You waited for the light to pass you, then made your run, and, as long as the space you were in remained dark, you had crossed in safety.

Now, however, he saw what a major feeder highway looked like in daylight -- six lanes across to the divider, six more beyond, and stretching out in either direction until it was lost in the morning haze. And all lanes packed, at first glance practically bumper to bumper, with speeding metal.

"Now listen to me closely," Cyn said. "You see the white lines -- the lane dividers. We're far enough from the nearest interchange that we shouldn't have to worry about computer-directed lane changes. In other words, the white lines are safe, as long as the cars are on automatic."

"And if they aren't, Cyn?" Balkoner asked.

"That's when it gets tricky. You read the lights. There's two kinds of lights, but the only ones, really, that we need to watch for are on the cars. The way it works, we cross the highway one lane at a time. When you come to a white line, stop and stand. Then look at the lights on



the cars coming to you. If they're steady, everything's okay. Check the person who's crossing behind you, look to make sure whoever's ahead has left you space on the next white line, then wait for the next gap in traffic and run. But if the lights on a car are flashing, that means its Riders have gone to manual, and that means you better be ready to dodge...."

"And the other lights, Cyn?" Gart interrupted.

She looked at him, then pointed up to one of the poles that rose in a gentle curve over the highway. "Those are primarily for road illumination, but look above the main bank of lights. You see those dish-like things? Those are sensors. They're supposed to alert officials inside the Enclaves if there's trouble -- a bad crash or something. When that happens -- and I've seen this once -- that strip of yellow lights just below will flash on and off, again and again. There may be sirens. The idea is to alert Riders that the computer is putting them into an emergency traffic pattern. Possibly pulling them off the road, possibly moving them from obstructed to cleared lanes -- the main thing is, the traffic patterns become unpredictable, so we get off the road as quick as we can."

"I've never seen that," Balkoner said, "I mean, I've heard about things like that -- traffic actually being pulled over -- but I thought they were only stories. Legends from pre-computer days, like when police patrolled the highways and pulled cars over with their own sirens."

"Now look," Cyn said, "this is the first of the three radial feeders we'll have to cross. The reason I chose to cross them here is the strips of land between them are narrow. Narrow enough that we shouldn't have to worry about things like dogs. Nevertheless, we should be alert; both on the road and off of it. Do you understand?"

Balkoner and Gart both nodded.

"Good," Cyn said, "on most of our crossings here on out, you'll go first, Rob. Gart, you'll be second. I'll be last so I'll be there to help if either of you should get in trouble." She looked at Balkoner, then took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "You up to that, Rob?"

Balkoner nodded. He stared at the highway -- six wide lanes across to the median. He watched as cars whizzed by.

"Now?" he said.

"Whenever you're ready. Look to the left -- watch oncoming traffic. Look for the gaps as they develop."

He looked to the left -- tried to see the gaps in traffic as patterns. Openings. Closings. He sensed a rhythm; a time when a car, computer driven, would be too close to the car ahead. It would compensate... overcompensate.

Now! he thought. He ran, scarcely looking. He stopped on the four inch wide strip.

"Excellent, Rob!" he heard Cyn shout. "Now it's Gart's turn -- if you can go, Rob, make your next crossing.

If not, give him room."

Balkoner glanced back to where Gart was crouching, muscles tensed, on the edge of the berm. Then he looked forward -- forward and left -- saw another gap start to open.

He heard the slap of Gart's boots as he launched himself, once again, into the lane of traffic. He came out on another white line and looked back to see Gart standing where he had been -- Cyn appeared suddenly, standing beside Gart. He turned forward again, forward and left, and sensed more than saw a new gap appear....

"Excellent, Rob. And you too, Gart." This time he heard Cynthia's voice right beside him. He looked around and saw that they had reached a concrete island...a long concrete island, waves of cars rushed by on either side.

"This is a relatively narrow divider," Cyn said. "Even for a feeder highway. It's not like the comfortable, grass-covered median we'll catch our breath on when we cross the beltway. But I chose this with a purpose too. It's *too* narrow to want to stay on for very long. Isn't that right, Rob?"

He saw her smile, then looked beyond at the traffic that whizzed by the *other* way. "Look to the right this time, but otherwise, the same technique? To anticipate rather than wait for the gaps?"

"Exactly, Rob. You ready to go?"

He nodded -- he knew why she chose this divider. One too narrow to rest on, yes, but also one too scary to let one's guard down on.

He saw, to his right, the first gap forming. Let it go by, then jumped into a second. Again the white line, the glance to the rear. Again the leap into a gap as it widened -- a dance to the side, once, when he saw one car's lights flashing -- a clap on the shoulders when he saw, under his feet, dirt and grass.

He fell to his knees, Cyn's voice in his ear, praising his first ever daytime crossing.

"We'll take the whole day," Cyn had told them after they'd crossed the first of the feeders. After they made it across the second, she let them rest until mid-afternoon. The third was the hardest -- eight lanes in each direction -- and near enough to a Y-intersection on its far side that a new set of patterns had to be learned before its last two lanes could be run.

Cyn had led that time, while the others waited on the wide, triangular median, and then guided them through an angular pattern. It lengthened the time one was in the roadway, but gave more warning when cars changed lanes.

And now they sat on a ridge -- a bare, windswept ridge set on a huge, serpentine piece of land large enough to build a whole Ped City neighborhood on.

"The deserted lands," Cyn said. She gestured

around them -- the grassy slope that they had just mounted, the forest-like tangle of signs and stanchions that edged the highway they'd just finished crossing.

"The sensors are moving. Why would that be, Cyn?" Gart pointed up at the nearest light post, at the small dishes above the main bank.

"I really don't know, unless they're alerting the computers to the changing traffic pattern. Traffic's still heavy in both directions, but if you watch it carefully, you'll see a shift -- a sort of emphasis -- toward the lanes going away from the Enclave, the right-hand traffic lanes we were crossing.

"You mean, every time, the part we crossed first was the most dangerous part?" Balkoner asked.

"Except for the last, yes. The worst lanes were crossed after we were rested -- if we were going the other way, we'd have made evening crossings when we could. The beltway, though, that's another thing. There's no variation according to time. But, the less variation there is, the safer the crossing is."

"And that's what comes next then? Just one more highway?"

"That's what comes next, yes." She winked at Balkoner. "After a quarter mile or so to the next ridge, that is. And after defending ourselves from the dogs...although I suspect the so-called patrols of dogs will turn out to be nothing but a handful of runaway pets. Nevertheless, we should have our clubs ready...."

"For dogs that might not be there at all?" Gart broke in.

"For dogs that might not be there at all -- for the power of rumor. Now look, let's get moving. I want us to camp on the second ridge, so we won't have too far to go in the morning. Then I'm going to want us to scour the valley between the ridges for brushwood and build a fire. That will help keep off the dogs that may or may not be there. Then I'm going to want us to get a good night's sleep. Since, with the beltway, there's no particular best time to cross, we might as well get it over with at dawn."

"It's still too easy," Gart said when they lined up along the side of the inner beltway the following morning. Cyn had been right -- there had been no dogs, even though she had them take turns standing guard through the night, clubs at the ready. "You talked about stray pets, there should have at least been some of them. And Rob talked about having hit a dog the night he crashed. Yet, when we get here, ready for trouble, it's almost as if someone had come and removed every danger, just to keep us off our guard."

"Well then, Gart, *don't get off your guard*," Cyn said. "I mean it. I really think we've just been extremely lucky so far, but there's a saying among frequent runners: Once you think you're immune to danger, that's when you're most likely to be killed."

"The beltway, though, Cyn," Balkoner cut in, "it's not as crowded as I'd have expected -- perhaps we are lucky. At least we don't have to carry these packs anymore. We can travel lightly since once we're across it's only a short climb up the embankment to the Enclave."

Cyn shook her head. "No, we'll carry our packs. And carry our clubs too, at the ready. If, for some reason, we *are* being led on like Gart suspects...."

"You're damn right we're being led on." Gart pointed up at the poles that towered above them. "Look at those sensors. Look how they're turning -- just like the ones we crossed under before. You said yesterday it was because of the changing traffic. But here, on the beltway, patterns don't change."

"And they don't, Gart. But they do ebb and flow. That's what we're going to look for now. When traffic comes on or off the beltway the whole mass slows down. That causes a gap that gradually fills, but we're still close enough to an on-ramp that we can take advantage of them. Now look, as far as you can, to the left; where the road curves toward us just after that rise. You see how one lane clears, then the next, and then the next, and so on, but just for a moment?"

"It's almost like a river, Cyn," Balkoner said. "Like a wave that starts at one bank, then, as it comes toward us, ripples across until it hits the opposite shore."

"Something like that, yes. We go with the waves. Stop on the white line, then run with the next wave until we've crossed all ten. You feel up to leading?"

Balkoner nodded. "Then wait at the median?"

"Yes," Cyn said. "Gart, you'll go second -- the usual way. I'll take up the rear. And just remember -- if any car's going off automatic and changing its pattern -- you'll see its lights flashing."

Balkoner nodded a second time, then concentrated on the highway. There were nine white lines, dividing ten lanes. The wide, grassy median beyond was concave surfaced -- perhaps for drainage -- so he could scarcely see beyond the nearest edge.

He wondered, *is that where they would find the wild dogs?* Or was Cyn right, that they'd passed the worst dangers, except for this one remaining expressway?

Ten lanes to the median. He stared left, saw a gap in the traffic approaching where he stood. He made his best estimate as to how quickly it would close, then launched himself to the first lane divider.

"Good!" Cyn's voice shouted. "Don't look back. Gart'll wait till you've cleared the next lane, then he'll come after."

Another lane crossed, eight to go on this side. Then the median, there would be time to rest while the others caught up; then ten lanes on the other side. He ran. Another lane safely crossed, he stood on the white line and stared at the cars that rushed toward him, looking at their lights to see if they flashed.



The fourth lane, the fifth lane, sixth, and seventh; he stood on the white line and glanced briefly backward. Cyn was standing four lanes back. Gart was dashing wildly, then he stood waving, just one lane behind.

He returned the wave, then found his gap. One more lane and, almost immediately, another. There shouldn't have been a gap so soon, he thought. He'd have to ask Cyn about it as soon as they all reached the median safely.

He looked to his left, only one lane to go. There were no lights flashing. Then he saw his gap.

He fell down, panting, in the surprisingly soft, damp grass of the highway median. He scarcely remembered crossing the last lane.

He felt the warm sun on his back, the weight of his pack twisted to one side. The cold steel of his club was still gripped tightly in his fist when he raised his head.

He stared at the wide, rolling, meadow-like median. It sloped down towards a stream. The far bank was strewn with flowers, then it rose to meet the final half of the highway.

He thought about Tolan, the things he would say when they met.

He scarcely heard the sound of the siren.

"Rob! Cyn's in trouble!"

He jumped to his feet, helped by Gart who was standing beside him. Still three lanes from the median, Cyn was dodging back to her white line. Car lights were flashing.

He wanted to help her -- to rush out to her. Gart held him back.

"No, Rob. Not that way. She's experienced, let her come to us."

They watched as she smiled, then gestured obscenely at another car that just missed her. A gesture Balkoner remembered from when he'd nearly hit her so long ago.

When he'd *tried* to miss her. But were these Riders trying to miss, too? Or...?

"Look up there, Rob," he heard Gart shout. The sound of the siren was louder now and, when he glanced up, he could see that not only car lights were flashing.

"The sensors, Rob. The yellow lights. The whole system is going off automatic."

"What does it mean, Gart?"

"It means that Cyn..." Gart's voice trailed off as they saw traffic part, leaving Cyn halfway across the ninth lane, standing in the path of a low, black, speeding car; it had a siren.

It picked up Cyn with its right front fender and threw her up and over its windshield. She fell, screaming, onto the line that separated the ninth and tenth lanes.

"Cyn!" Balkoner shouted. Gart pulled him back when a car dodged around her, nearly hitting them where they stood at the median's edge.

A second car hit her, then a third, while all they could do was watch, helplessly, from the median. Finally, the yellow lights above them stopped flashing and the traffic went back to its normal pattern.

"Bastards," Gart said, after they had stood in silence for nearly ten minutes. "They *did* set us up. They planned it all out. They watched us coming on their sensors, then planned it out on their Goddamn computers."

Balkoner stood beside him, staring at the roadway where Cyn's body lay unmoving. He strained his eyes for some hope of a sign of life. "Gart," he finally said, "I'm going to get her. I'm not going to leave her out there like that."

"Are you crazy, Rob? That car that hit her -- the one with the siren. It was an official car. And the sensors..." he pointed up at the nearest pole, "they're still moving. We do anything and I'll guarantee...I already saw a car go off the beltway onto an access road, doubling back probably...I guarantee it'll come for us too."

"We can't leave her lying there," Balkoner said. "The least we can do is bring her here -- find something in our packs, maybe, that we can dig with to bury her body, so people will know she made it this far. It's what she would have wanted."

Gart looked at Balkoner. "Yeah. What she wanted. You loved her, didn't you?"

Balkoner nodded.

"So did I, Rob. Maybe not the same way as you, but we all loved her -- except maybe Marcus." He paused, then shrugged his pack off his shoulders. "I suppose, too, if they set this up, they're going to come after us sooner or later."

"You mean you'll help me?"

"Yeah," Gart said. "One way or another, if we get out of this, I'm going to make sure people know what happened, too. It's what I can do for her, make other runners remember her, always. But we're going to have to plan for this."

"What do you mean?"

Gart pointed up again at the sensors. "I'm going to want you to go up the side of the road toward the traffic. Be ready to make an angled run, but only after I've already made it across. I'll pick her up and carry her back. I may be older than you, but I'm stronger than you might think. But you'll have the hard job, the dangerous part."

"The dangerous part?"

"When I take her back, you'll be the decoy."

Balkoner nodded. He'd draw the traffic away from Gart -- he remembered the Ped who had jumped out toward him and thrown something...a lifetime ago. He walked deliberately up the median, as Gart directed, and faced the traffic. Gart shouted.

He turned and saw him run. Gart waved when he

reached the white line just down-traffic from Cyn's broken body. Balkoner looked to his right, saw a gap widen, and started his own run.

The siren was deafening. It blasted suddenly from the road's far side.

Traffic scattered away from both the ninth and tenth lanes. He looked up, once, and saw yellow lights flashing. Gart was bent over picking up Cyn's body.

Turning, he saw the low black car creep into the gap that was left when the other traffic fled. It seemed as if it were moving in slow motion.

He looked back. Gart was already in the tenth lane, on his way to the median, going so slowly.

The black car lurched toward him, angling inward.

"Gart, get back!" He shrugged off his pack and swung it forward into the windshield. He jumped as it swerved farther into the tenth lane, toward the median. He managed to strike with his club just before it passed him.

"Now, Gart!" he screamed. He ran, lunged forward. He struck again, hard, at the car's rear quarter. It wobbled, as if, too late, its driver was trying to dodge him.

He saw the backs of the two Rider's heads -- one jerking forward -- as the car swerved into the median. It bounced over rocks and grass, nearly tipping, as it slid sideways down the slope to the edge of the stream.

Balkoner waited until Gart had finished lowering Cyn's body onto the ground, then went to the passenger side of the car. He opened the door and a form fell out. He wasn't surprised to see that it was Marcus.

"You've killed him, you know," a familiar voice said from the driver's side. Somehow, that didn't surprise him either.

"Tolan?" he asked.

"I know you, don't I? From before you were...whatever. Marcus had warned me that one of you people was new."

"Tolan," he said again. He reached inside and grabbed at the driver, trying to pull him out.

"Just a minute, I'll come out myself. Or at least let me unfasten my seat belt. How do you think I survived this ordeal?"

Balkoner waited, looking down at where Marcus lay. Probably the man was just knocked out, not *dead* like Cyn was. The car, certainly, scarcely showed any visible damage.

He hefted his club, then thought better of it.

He had an idea.

"Hurry up, Tolan," he muttered, then turned to Gart. "The car's only a two-seater, but this model has bucket seats. There's space between them. Enough to fit Cyn."

"What do you mean?" Gart asked.

"Yes. What do you mean?" Tolan's voice was louder, now that he had crawled out of the car and was standing beside them. "You're Robert, aren't you. Robert

Balkoner. Look, I'll tell you what. Just help me get my car back to the road and I'll help you get out of Ped City. That's what you want, isn't it?

"You going to let him do that, Rob?" Gart asked. "After he...."

"Look, I'll help to arrange things for your friend too. He's Gart, isn't he? Believe me, Robert, the only one Marcus said we had to stop was the woman, Cyn. Sure, your friend talked about arming the Peds and attacking the Enclaves, but he was just talk. She was the one who was going to change things. To organize people...."

"You don't remember me, do you Tolan?" Balkoner cut in. He looked at the councilor's blank expression. "You really don't, do you? I was your friend."

"There are so many people," Tolan said. "So many things that one must remember. You can't expect a person like me to remember Peds too. But once you're re-established, Robert, I'm sure we will be friends. And Gart as well, Robert..."

Balkoner shook his head. "But, when we're Peds, we're out of sight, aren't we. Unless we're negotiators like Marcus. People who help you. Now you look, Tolan. I want to take your *real* friend, Marcus, across the stream. Away from the car. And you stay there too."

Tolan stared, open mouthed, as both Gart and Balkoner lifted their clubs, then bent down to Marcus and started to drag the still unconscious form through the stream. "I don't know why you want me to do this," he started to say, "but...."

"Just shut up, Tolan. Just do what I tell you. And then, if your car's radio still works, maybe we'll get help for you."

Balkoner waited, then helped Gart pick up Cyn's body and place it, gently, into the car. He walked around to the other side and got in himself and turned the key. The engine started -- memories came back. He geared it down manually, into low, and slowly started feeding power to the engine. He maneuvered up the slope to the side of the beltway.

He stopped, glanced back to where Tolan stood across the stream. To where Marcus had finally gotten up into a sitting position.

"Gart," he called. He reached across to the passenger side and let the older man get inside. "Now, fasten your seat belt. Remember Marcus. I don't want you killed too."

Gart nodded. "Where are we going, Rob?" he asked. Balkoner eased the car into the stream of traffic.

"We're taking Cyn home, to do what she wanted. What she *really* wanted, and what Tolan fears most. We're going to organize not just the artists, but all of Ped City under her name. And not to fight against the Enclaves the way you used to argue with her, but to *compete* with them. To deal with the Enclaves the same way they deal with other Enclaves in other cities."



Gart sat in silence as Balkoner keyed the car's computer, setting it to take them back to their home sector. Finally he spoke.

"I'll go along with you part way," he said. "I'll do what I can to help spread Cyn's story and, like she said when you two talked me into thinking we could actually reach an Enclave, the fame she'll have gained will help bring people to us. But still, she didn't get all the way. She didn't lead us *across* the beltway. And people will know that, in the end, she was still beaten."

Balkoner shook his head and smiled. The first time he'd really smiled since he'd first ended up in Ped City. He looked at Cyn's body, lying between them, and touched her hand.

"Except for one thing," he finally said. "She did more than just lead us over a beltway and into an Enclave -- and people will know that. She gave us the means to take others there too."

"Well, yeah," Gart said. "I suppose, in a sense, if what you mean is she got us this car -- but it's still a two-seater. Maybe you can fit a third between the seats, but that's still just two people besides the driver. Unless you think, because of its official markings, you could use it

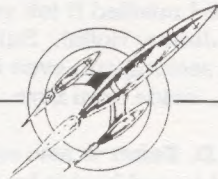
to force other cars off the road. To capture them as well...."

"Or use its siren to stop a whole beltway. Yes, that's part of it, but not the main part. What she did for us -- look at yourself, Gart. See what we're doing. What people will see when we reach our home sector."

"Two Peds in a car. But...."

"Not just two Peds. Two *men* in a car. The equals of anyone in the whole city." He paused and watched as Gart, slowly, began to smile also.

"That's right, Gart," he finally continued. "What Cyn has done for us, and for everyone else who understands what we've accomplished, is *make* us the Riders' equals."



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# Guest Contributors

by Kevin W. Rogers

**Gerard Daniel Houarner** of New York has been published in *Space & Time*, *Pulphouse*, *The Noctulpa Horror Anthology*, and *Best of the Midwest* #1. He has a story set in the same universe in an upcoming *Midnight Zoo* anthology and should be appearing in *Argonaut* sometime in the near future...hmmm, I think the *Argonaut* piece *must* be out by now, I've already seen Steven Sawicki give it a favorable review.

**D. Douglas Graham** is from Missouri and is extremely easy to work with on rewrites. Unfortunately, either he neglected to send us a list of his credits, or I misfiled it (oh yes, it's down in the basement with Jimmy Hoffa). Suffice to say, his fiction is worth seeking out, even if I can't tell you where to find it...aside from here, I mean.

**Jessie D. Eaker** is also easy to work with, but I don't need to pad his bio by telling you this, because I actually have *his* cover letter. He is from Virginia and has appeared in three *Sword and Sorceress* anthologies (#6, 7, and 9), *Pandora*, *Beyond*, and *Z-Miscellaneous*. He also has two stories scheduled to appear in *Science Fiction Review*...whether *Science Fiction Review* is scheduled to appear anytime soon is, apparently, a matter of some speculation.

**Mark Lax** is a fan of pulp magazines. I know this because he was nice enough to send along one from his collection (we had a custody battle on the staff, Tim won). He apparently (I'm running on secondary sources here...yes, I lost his cover letter too!) publishes war games and RPG's with the Hill-GLE Company in addition to putting together projects like *Weird Detective Mystery Adventures* and *Illegal Get Rich Quick Schemes*. Intriguing titles, to say the least. He is from the state of Illinois.

**Kate Baer** works as a Systems Analyst for a major insurance company in New York State (she has our sympathies). This is her first published piece of fiction. She complains that working 18 hours a day to pay the bills hasn't left her enough time to do more. Excuses, excuses.

**Frank O. Dodge** makes his home in the state of LA. With any luck, I am correct and this means Louisiana (not alabama or something like that). He will be appearing in upcoming issues of *Poetic Knight*, *The Barrelhouse* and *Gaslight*. He is a veteran of the Navy, having fought in both World

War II and Korea (he served during Vietnam, but spent it on the Mediterranean where, presumably, the level of conflict was somewhat less). He is now retired and spends most of his time between writing and, given the list of previous marriages and offspring he provided us, grandchildren (this guy writes *comprehensive* cover letters). Oh yes, Warren's daughter appreciated the gift. Thanks Frank!

**James S. Dorr**, from Indiana, is a winner of the *L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future* contest and will be appearing in their 1992 anthology (hmm, I guess that probably is out by now also...) *Why should I wear a seatbelt?* (see page 62). He is also an associate editor for a city magazine and a full time nonfiction writer. His credits include *Pulphouse*, *Science Fiction Review*, *Fantastic Collectibles*, *Short Story Digest*, and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Did I mention he's easy to work with also? No, didn't need too, I had enough other stuff to say....

**Christopher Willingham** is a fine artist and student from Massachusetts. This is his first work illustrating commercial fiction, but we still respect him anyway.

\*\*\*

And to all of you (and there were *lots* of you) who submitted manuscripts that, for some reason, were rejected, Warren, Tim, and I would like to give our thanks. Without the SF writers, SF magazines wouldn't be very interesting to read, would they?

And thanks once again to Janet Fox of *Scavenger's Newsletter* and all the other folks who listed our guidelines and helped us to let people know we were here. It isn't easy starting a magazine, but you all helped to make it a little less difficult.

For the record, it isn't necessary to send us gifts to get published. I want to go on record as stating that we had *already* bought stories from Mark and Frank before they sent us *anything!* "Honest your honor, I know it looks bad, but...."



# A Question of Opportunity

By Kevin W. Rogers

Name a surrealist painter, any one-- as long as it isn't Salvador Dali.

Hmm, hold it, that takes some thought.

I am willing to bet that, even if you enjoy a number of surrealists besides Dali, it was his name which leapt immediately to mind when you saw the words 'surrealist painter'.

Why is this?

Well, one reason is that Dali's name is the one most often associated with that school of painting. He has become the 'archetypal' surrealist in our consciousness.

Quick, name a poet.

I bet you named someone you studied in English class, maybe even someone whose work you can't stand. Our archetypal poet tends to resemble William Shakespeare a lot more closely than it does Alan Ginsberg, because this is the image most often presented to us by our schooling and culture.

Daring and innovative ideas can take a while to catch on because of this kind of conditioning. If we see a poem done in an atypical manner, our gut reaction tends to be, "this isn't poetry". What the piece *is* often gets lost until we have had a chance to adjust our archetype to include it.

SF needs constant innovation to avoid self-parody. We are truly "the fiction of the imagination"; take away the imagination and all you have left are the rocket ships. The spirit will be gone; that sense of exploration will be sadly absent as we journey down the 'beaten path' of what SF is *expected* to be.

The few major SF magazines do an excellent job of

providing quality fiction. They are one of the major vehicles for the collective culture of SF. I read and enjoy most of them regularly. However, the fact remains that they only publish the sub-genres and story types they feel will appeal to the tastes of their readers and which fit their editorial focus.

On the up side, when you buy a magazine you have enjoyed in the past, you have a reasonable expectation of enjoying its current contents.

On the down side, unconventional authors with new ideas only have four or five opportunities to find an editor who can see the merit of their piece. Inevitably, many new ideas are going to be missed. Editors may be looking for innovative materials, but they are only human. They may reject a story for not fitting their archetype of 'good SF' instead seeing its basic merits.

So where does this archetype of 'good SF' come from?

It is built up and modified over the years by every popular story which is published. Everyone, readers and editors alike, judge today's fiction based upon yesterday's Hugo winners and nominees.

Innovation is locked out of this avenue. Until an individual editor sees past the archetype of our collective expectations, innovation might as well not exist. Trends in SF have as much to do, if not more, with what *has been* published as with what *is being* written. It is hard to lead the way if nobody sees you.

In the early years of our genre, there were many paying markets. The majority of SF's archetypal concepts were established during this period. There were enough different magazines being published that a huge variety

of stories entered our culture. In today's environment, many of these stories wouldn't have been seen.

This is where the smaller magazines can make a valuable contribution. If SF is to survive, it needs to be diverse; far more diverse than the handful of major markets can make it. There need to be more *paying* SF outlets which will attract quality, innovative fiction.

Indeed, these markets are appearing once more. **Aboriginal Science Fiction** and Algis Budrys' **Tomorrow** have been around for a while and have made a great contribution towards keeping the field fresh. There are also several other modest-sized SF magazines coming out in the near future.

And now, there is **Harsh Mistress**. We hope to foster diversity and innovation by providing another 'eye' in the paying market. Our focus is action/adventure SF.

What does that mean? Maybe not what you expect. We aim for the feel and spirit of the 'pulp', but we don't want to stick to the 'beaten path'. We are looking for tomorrow's archetypes.

Of course, that doesn't mean we are an experimental fiction magazine. Quality SF is what we are about; that, in itself is an opportunity for innovation. Meanwhile, we plan to have fun.

And we're keeping the rocket ships!





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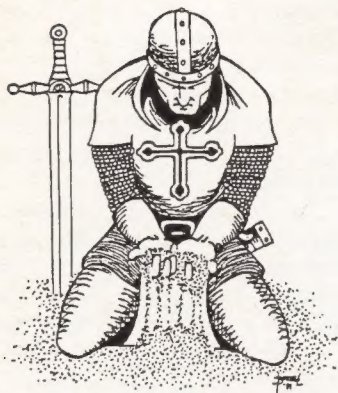
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